

A lively and engaging stroll through some foundations for literacy, democracy, and education more generally, this is the kind of book we need at this time. Drawing on observation, research, personal anecdote, and historical example, the book reads like a conversation among friends over coffee. While linking democracy and literacy, Tom offers us principles to guide the teaching of literacy, and along the way casually teaches us how to write engaging books.

—**PETER JOHNSTON**, author of *Opening Minds*

As an educator and a researcher in the teaching of writing for over three decades, when I started reading this book, I just couldn't stop, as I continued to feel inspired, reinvigorated, and just couldn't wait to get back inside my classroom. I am sure anyone who reads this book would be similarly inspired and energized to teach and learn.

—**DANLING FU**, author of *"My Trouble Is My English"*

Reading *Literacy's Democratic Roots* is like being invited to pull up a chair in Tom's family room while he narrates a fascinating slideshow of the most important, most lasting ELA concepts that promote "access and diversity." It's a family epic—a pedagogical ancestry that reaches into both our roots and our classrooms today. With his trademark storytelling, Tom chronicles where we've been and inspires us to push ever forward in the best interest of all students. This book is both a record and a call to action; I will return to it again and again.

—**REBEKAH O'DELL**, coauthor of *A Teacher's Guide to Mentor Texts, 6–12*

This is not a book: it's a conversation, or a series of conversations, all of them related to the work we do as teachers . . . with every major thinker who has contributed to and shaped how we teach and think about literacy in the last fifty years. It is a conversation with ourselves as much as with our profession as it was, is, and will be in the coming years.

—**JIM BURKE**, author of *The English Teacher's Companion*

When Tom Newkirk writes, I read. In volume after volume he has pushed my thinking, from considering how our minds are made for stories to the impact that embarrassment has on learning. He demonstrates how exclusionary practices, even when performed with good intentions, slam a door in the face of young scholars. Newkirk challenges us to examine our curriculum for areas where exclusive practices are often the norm—recitation, writing, literary interpretation, book selection—and offers alternative methods for opening wide the door of literacy.

—**CAROL JAGO**, author of *The Book in Question*

Imagine a feast of small, delightful plates. Each bite is rich. You linger over its elements: the hint of curry or cinnamon, the surprising zap of red pepper. This is the closest I can come to describing the power of *Literacy's Democratic Roots*. Each chapter schools you in research and the nuances of teaching well. Newkirk is a wise, gentle guide. There is room to think here, to place these ideas against the grain of your own teaching.

—**PENNY KITTLE**, author and writing teacher at Plymouth State University

Reading a new book from Tom Newkirk is like a long-awaited visit from a really smart and great-hearted friend. After reading this book, I am now much smarter about how to create a democratic classroom, teach for democracy, and support students in developing the dispositions of democracy. This book has reminded me why I teach and has already helped me to meet my deepest commitments and hopes for myself, my students, and for all of society.

—**JEFFREY WILHELM**, Distinguished Professor of English Education at Boise State University

Literacy's Democratic Roots solidifies Tom Newkirk's place at the head of the table of today's most influential writers and thinkers about literacy. Grounded in history and democratic tradition, but especially relevant given the current political discourse, Newkirk's eight big ideas will help you to build a more just, equitable, and engaging classroom. This book should be a starting point for anyone interested in meaningful school reform.

—**KELLY GALLAGHER**, author of *Readicide*

As we strive to promote equity and social justice throughout our schools and society, Tom Newkirk's new book offers educators guiding frameworks and creative ways to rethink literacy teaching and learning in schools and classrooms. Creating democratic classroom spaces where students' stories are viewed as valuable sources of knowledge *alongside the writing in the field* challenges traditional hierarchies and what Tom so aptly labels "killer dichotomies," to create spaces where teachers and students are free to co-create knowledge, write on topics important to them, and work toward a more just society.

—**DIANE WAFF**, Professor of Practice, Director, Philadelphia Writing Project, Penn GSE

In this moment of our history and education, Newkirk reminds us of the democratic constitution of the public school experiment: *everyone* can come in. And everyone can and should come to this book to remember and renew, or to discover for the first time, eight transformative ideas for inviting *all* students to become strong readers, writers, and thinkers. He honors these foundational concepts and their creators as well as several brilliant new voices and practices in literacy education in eight essays that journey through impassioned arguments, illustrative stories, and powerful sample activities to use with students.

—**KATHERINE BOMER**, Professor of Practice, College of Education, University of North Texas

As I read through *Literacy's Democratic Roots*, I found myself reminded of the how and why of successful classroom practice: that the classroom must be a place where student voice is encouraged; that we succeed most when we draw from their funds of knowledge; that rigid formulas for writing or school-imposed titles for reading will usually produce the opposite effect we intend; and that, as Tom has suggested before, the importance of story is not to be underestimated. Tom has written something here that can help both the new teacher, who would benefit from this book's guidance and direction, and the veteran teacher, who needs the occasional reminder of the ideas that inform meaningful and democratic classroom practice. The greatest praise I can give the book is this: that somehow, in the summer after a terrible school year, Tom Newkirk has got me looking forward with optimism to this next school year.

—**MARTIN BRANDT**, author of *Between the Commas*

THOMAS NEWKIRK

LITERACY'S
A Personal Tour
DEMOCRATIC
Through 8 Big Ideas
ROOTS

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Introduction

LITERACY AND DEMOCRACY— OR “WHERE I’M FROM”

If you enter almost any public school, you will encounter a range of offices, for administrators, counselors, nurses, custodians, security. But there will be one type of office you will not find—an admissions office, for the simple reason that public schools are open to all. Don’t speak English? You’re in. Need a wheelchair to move from place to place? You’re in. You’ve suffered from trauma or have a learning disability? You’re in. You’re a Democrat, a Republican, a Free Stater? Christian, Muslim, agnostic? You’re in.

This absence of an admissions office, this open door, is the extraordinary feature of the public school. Its absence symbolizes a promise, or at least an aspiration, to serve the needs of all who enter, to make everyone feel welcome, respected, at home, and successful. That we so often fall short of this ideal does not negate its significance.

The public school, what Horace Mann called the “common school,” open to all, is a great democratic ambition, achievement, and challenge. It was a realization of that wonderful expression of John Adams, prominent in the Massachusetts Constitution (and the New Hampshire Constitution, which copied it), commanding that “in all future periods” governments should “cherish” public education (Volinsky 2004, 837). Cherish, hold dear.

When I first played with the idea of writing about big generative ideas, I considered each chapter a separate unit, unconnected thematically. But when I explained the project to others, the question was always “So how are these tied together?” At first, I resisted this expectation. It felt like I was planning a basic dive—say, a one and a half flip—and someone was asking that I add a full twist. But I became convinced there was a thematic connection—to democracy. Hence the current title.

If someone with way too much time on their hands were to do a word search of all I have written, I suspect *democracy* would not appear. It seemed that democracy, or patriotism, or love of country, was always co-opted by the educational right, who cling to test scores (especially when they show decline), “cultural literacy,” (white) nationalism, or a sanitized view of our history, and who at some level see diversity as a problem. Whatever the question, the answer was often testing, standardization, or privatization.

A case in point: In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* warned us (melo)dramatically that public education was so deficient that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threaten our very future as a Nation and a people” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 6). Or worse. “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war” (6).

Only one problem—even as the ink was drying from that report, the United States was entering a prolonged period of extraordinary growth, running to about the year 2000, averaging 3.5 percent growth over that period (Macrotrends 2010–23), outpacing the Japanese economy, which was the concern at the time. Clearly US workers, educated in US schools, had something to do with that. Talk about bad predictions. Yet I’m not aware of any retractions or corrections—because only negative national education stories sell.

It has also felt to me presumptuous to justify or explain my ideas in such broad political terms. My focus was usually on the individual student, held back by the constraints of curricula. The title of my last book, *Writing Unbound*, surely emphasized that theme. But as I thought

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about what the eight ideas in this book have in common, I did feel that there were democratic values at the heart—that they all had to do with access and diversity, with finding ways of connecting educational goals with the funds of knowledge students bring in when they walk through that door.

As I was refining my idea of the book, I sent out a tweet that received a strong response—with some followers turning it into a visual. I wrote: “The house of literacy has a thousand doors. Our job is to help students find one that will let them in.” It seemed to me there was the germ of a political idea here—that too many students never entered the house of literacy, and why was that? And what could we do about it? How can we make entry more possible, more inviting, more pleasurable? How are we as educators being held back by rigid ideas and curricula that do not reflect and honor what students, particularly students of color, students outside the mainstream, bring to schooling? How can we disrupt those patterns? How can we tell a better story about literacy? I found that these questions guided me to the ideas I would write about—and that it no longer seemed presumptuous to see this as a democratic issue.

THE TOUR GUIDE

As I wrote this book, I came to see myself as a tour guide, taking you and other readers through eight big, amazing houses—each with more rooms than we could get to. I have spent time in the rooms of these houses. I’ve lived in them, and I know others who have helped build and furnish them, even some who set down the foundations. We’ll hear from some of them. I will call attention to artifacts in these rooms and tell stories. I’ll have to leave out a lot since our time is limited, and almost anyone who has written on literacy in the past thirty years has spent time in these houses or added their personal contribution, even done some of the major (re)construction.

And, while I’m in the mood to admit limitations, let me say that there are other houses of literacy that could have been on this tour. In preparation for writing, I asked a number of scholars what their eight great ideas would be. Many of their suggestions would have made for possible chapters—scaffolding, writing across the curriculum, zone of proximal development, prior knowledge, comprehension strategies, voice, choice, flow, approximation, and metacognition, to name a few. Some of my correspondents tactfully pointed out that the idea of *idea* was vague and that it might include practices, concepts, or fully developed theories. One might protest that independent reading is a practice while Rosenblatt’s transactional model of reading is a fully developed theory. To this imprecision, I can only plead guilty.

It is sinful to make students feel inadequate or out of place—to silence them, to treat them as empty vessels, or to make literacy such a chore that they choose not to try. Sinful.

Like most analogies, my metaphor of houses ultimately breaks down because there is considerable overlap in the ideas. Funds of knowledge, for example, kept reappearing in multiple chapters—and I consider it a democratic touchstone, this assertion that students, *all students*, come through the school doors funded, *rich* in personal, family, and cultural knowledge that we need to recognize and use. This premise is central to the role of choice in the writing process, independent reading, and the transactional model of reading as well as other chapter topics.

As I challenged myself to think of a unifying principle for the book, it came down to a core belief that as humans we have the great gift, the great evolutionary achievement, of speech and story. It's what we do best—and all literacy instruction needs to honor and build on that gift. It is sinful to make students feel inadequate or out of place—to silence them, to treat them as empty vessels, or to make literacy such a chore that they choose not to try. Sinful. The traditions of writing instruction in particular—their obsession with form and correctness—need to be corrected.

These eight big *democratic* ideas can help us build a house that everyone can enter.