5 | The Power of *Authentic* Literacy

Adolescents entering the adult world in the 21st century will read
and write more than at any other time in human history. They will
need advanced levels of literacy to perform their jobs, run their
households, act as citizens, and conduct their personal lives.

—Richard Vacca

*Imagine . . . all students, regardless of socioeconomic circumstance,
having spent most of their class time in English, social studies, and other
courses closely and carefully reading, rereading, discussing, and writing
about the ideas in various texts. Imagine every student graduating from
high school having analyzed and imitated excellent examples of adult
writing and having written countless close literary analyses, essays, grant
proposals, business plans, and position papers on multiple political, sci-
entific, and cultural controversies—after carefully reading and discussing
two or more conflicting documents on innumerable engaging issues.*

As ambitious as this vision may sound, we have more than
enough time—12 years!—to provide an ample amount of such experi-
ences, which would shatter achievement records, reduce dropouts,
and ensure college readiness and graduation rates at levels never
achieved. Many students would graduate from high school educated
as well as or better than many current college graduates. If such expe-
riences were common—and they could be—our schools would be sec-
ond to none.

The lifelong consequences of good—or poor—literacy skills are
monumental. Whether we acquire them in science, social studies, or
English, they affect not only school success, but intelligence itself—
our ability to think. Authentic literacy, rightly acquired, profoundly
affects students' life and career options, their understanding of the
world, their facility with concepts and ideas. These intellectual abili-
ties pervade every subject area. For these reasons, we need to have
the deepest and most complete understanding of what literacy is and
how students can best acquire it. Effective literacy strategies are far
simpler than much that we've been told.