PETER WILLIAMSON

ENGAGING LITERACY PRACTICES THROUGH INQUIRY AND ENACTMENT IN TEACHER EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

Current expanded views of literacy are recasting the debate in the U.S. about "why Johnny can't read" (Flesch, 1955) from focusing narrowly on improving language instruction to looking more broadly at disciplinary literacy instruction across content areas. Terms like *multiliteracies* and *situated literacies* highlight our new understandings about the multimodal, cultural, and contextual nature of literacy practices, and the implications of these ideas are having a considerable impact on schooling. Though resources remain tight and curricula have generally become more restrictive, teachers are being asked to innovate and enact methods for helping students develop skills for new kinds of multimodal interpretation and knowledge production. The importance of preparing students to be successful in the information economy of the "flat world" (Darling-Hammond, 2010) places literacy teachers at the heart of every meaningful school improvement effort.

The persistence of the achievement gap between historically underserved students and their white and Asian counterparts foregrounds a particular set of issues facing literacy teachers and those who prepare them. First, it has been widely documented that the resources for creating information-rich learning environments with the capacity and technology for inventive interdisciplinary literacy instruction are unequally distributed to higher achieving schools in wealthier districts (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2006). Literacy teachers in under-resourced schools face the probability that their students will have fewer opportunities to actually practice the concepts and skills that they aim to teach, especially those associated with the digital and multimedia literacies that are fast becoming the currency of our information economy. Second, research indicates that highly qualified teachers are also unequally distributed, and that students in poor and urban schools experience "a revolving door" of new and underprepared teachers who are less able to enact deep disciplinary literacy instruction and the creativity required to do more with fewer resources (Darling-Hammond, 2010). These inequities have led some scholars to reframe the achievement gap as an *opportunity gap* (A. Flores, 2007), given the unequal access that poorer students have to the experience

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information-rich learning environments called for in the position statements issued by organizations like the National Councils for the Teachers of English (NCTE) or Math (NCTM).

The work of preparing teachers for new literacy classrooms involves helping them take stock of the opportunities that students have to engage in meaningful literacy activities while at the same time preparing them with strategies for enriching those opportunities. Visionary teacher education necessarily embraces the paradox that we must prepare teachers for the schools that we have while simultaneously preparing them for the schools that we want. For new teachers, this means developing strategies for understanding and assessing the literacies that students bring to school, building upon available resources for developing and strengthening those literacies, and then pressing students to traverse the usual disciplinary landscapes so that they can make meaning from signs and symbols that include but are also beyond the printed word.

BACKGROUND OF THE AUTHOR

I began my career as a special education teacher working with students who had been removed from the general pubic education system because of emotional and behavioral problems. As a new teacher operating on an emergency credential, I joined the ranks of the many underprepared teachers who have historically staffed high-need schools. After several years of teaching English but also serving as the science teacher, the PE teacher, the behavior "specialist," and the occasional cooking instructor, I realized that my lack of preparation made me part of the problem of inadequate instruction at my school rather than a part of the solution. After a year of graduate school where I earned my secondary English credential, I returned to public education to teach language arts and journalism in an urban Bay Area high school. Like many teacher educators, it was my collaborations with novice teachers in my English classroom that led me back to graduate school to pursue a PhD in Curriculum & Teacher Education at Stanford. After completing my degree and then serving as the Director of Stanford's *Teacher's For a New Era* project for two years, I followed my passion for urban education into a faculty position at the University of San Francisco (USF). At USF I teach courses such as *Academic Literacy*, *English Methods*, *Learning & Teaching*, and *Curriculum Development & Design*. I am also a founder and the Faculty Director of the *San Francisco Teacher Residency* program, which aims to recruit and prepare highly qualified teachers who are committed to serving in San Francisco's hardest to staff schools and subjects. A related line of work takes me to the school within the *San Francisco Juvenile Justice Center*, where I collaborate with English and special education teachers on literacy curricula for incarcerated youth. Across the settings of my teaching and scholarship, I focus on how teachers learn and enact effective disciplinary literacy practices. I will always be a student of teaching, and I am continually amazed at how much more there is to know.

CONNECTING RESEARCH AND PRACTICE: CORE COMPETENCIES AND LITERACY EDUCATION

My research focuses on how teachers learn to enact complex literacy-related practices within the settings of their teacher education coursework, and how these practices are connected with what they later enact in the field. With a particular focus on how English teachers learn to engage their students in discussions of literature, I study what teachers seem to learn when they participate in activities like instructional simulations in their methods courses. Through qualitative case studies and discourse analysis, I seek to understand how teachers learn practical and conceptual pedagogical tools for responding to student thinking while they also foster literacy environments where students can build upon each other's ideas and negotiate meaning. A central tenet of my work is that classroom talk is a key aspect of literacy development, and that literacy itself is now broadly conceptualized as communication practices that vary across textual and graphical representations as well as across cultures and contexts (Gee, 1999; Luke & Freebody, 1997). As the facilitators of classroom talk, teachers are chiefly responsible for helping students participate in literacy-rich school environments. As Douglas Barns has argued, if teachers can "Change the nature of the communication, [then they can] change the nature of what is learned" (Barnes, 1976).

The findings from my research point to the importance of explicit and participatory modeling in the teaching of methods. By explicit, I mean that it is not enough for teacher educators to model instructional practices without being transparent about their pedagogical thinking. Much about teaching is invisible to the novice eye, and explicit modeling allows educators to unpack the pedagogical decisions that they make in their planning and in the fleeting moments that characterize classroom interactions. By participatory, I mean that novices must have opportunities to try out the roles that they will play as teachers in the classroom. Engaging in instructional enactments as graduate students may not be enough for them to fully "see" (Warren-Little, 2003) the work involved in accomplished teaching. Novices need opportunities to enact complex practices such as discussion facilitation so that they can try out the role of the teacher, receive feedback, and perhaps rehearse and even retry particular questioning and responding strategies (Horn, 2010).

My research is situated within a profession-wide push to reshape the teacher education curriculum around the work that teachers actually do. Teacher education has been widely criticized for its uneven and often poorly supported approach to preparing novices for clinical practice (Esch, 2010; Larabee, 2004; Zeichner, 2010). In response, educators, researchers, and policymakers have called for teacher education to be "turned upside down" to focus more centrally on the development of effective clinical practice (Blue Ribbon Panel on Clinical Preparation and Partnerships for Improved Student Learning, 2010). New efforts to anchor the teacher education curriculum in everyday practice have led scholars to examine methods for helping novices learn "high leverage" teaching practices in the contexts

of their university coursework (Ball & Forzani, 2009). For example, Deborah Ball and others have identified practices that are likely to be "fundamental elements of professional work" and that tend to be more difficult to learn through experience in the field alone (Ball, Sleep, Boerst, & Bass, 2009). Given that the work of teaching involves more than can be learned in single courses or even programs, teacher educators must highlight particular features of practice over others in order to help novices develop core competencies and understandings (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Kosnik & Beck, 2009).

In literacy education, the work of helping novices develop core competencies necessarily begins with an examination of how literacy is defined and what these definitions mean for classroom instruction. While there is broad consensus among theorists that new literacies are social practices that are multiple in nature and vary according to their contexts and communicative purposes (New London Group, 2000), literacy educators must facilitate opportunities for new teachers to explore the multimodal, intertextual, and rapidly evolving nature of literacy in the modern world. The new core competencies may be different than the commonplace assessment and instruction practices that do not take into account more multimodal approaches such as dramatic performance, digital representations of content, and inventive uses of graphic text as a means of expression (Oldham, 2005). Literacy teachers must be ready to keep breathtaking pace with how language and communication are changing in our schools and society.

In addition to developing core competencies for accomplished literacy instruction, candidates must also become critical consumers of the instructional resources that are available to them and evaluators of the environments where they teach. All schools are not created equal, and teachers play a central role in determining the kind of language that is valued in the classroom and how this relates to the distribution of power and authority. Despite decades of attention to issues of language bias and discrimination in society and in schools (B. Flores, Cousin, & Diaz, 1991; Lippi-Green, 1997), ample evidence indicates that the education system in the United States continues to track language minority students into low achieving classes that lack rigorous instruction and adequate resources-including qualified teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2010). While educators have responded by developing "culturally responsive" and "multicultural" approaches to teaching, literacy instruction must go further to empower students to value and leverage their language resources as tools for critiquing the system and establishing their voice. This "critical literacy" stance requires educators to help candidates understand their roles in setting the conditions for students to resist and even reverse the dominant patterns of language discrimination in schools (Gutierrez, 1994). By asking candidates to consider how teachers structure opportunities for students to engage in rich literacy activities across content areas, literacy educators can help candidates develop the skills and habits of mind to assess the learning environments where they teach (Miller et al., 2011; Scherff & Piazza, 2009).

TEACHER EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Teacher education in California is generally limited to "fifth year" post-baccalaureate programs that candidates attend once they have demonstrated subject matter competency on a range of tests focused on content and, to a lesser degree, content pedagogy. Coursework and fieldwork requirements vary, though accredited programs are structured to meet the Standards for Educator Preparation and Educator Competence issued by the California Commission for Teacher Credentialing. The Teacher Education Program at the University of San Francisco (USF) annually enrolls around 70 candidates who complete 36 units of coursework in addition to nearly one academic year of student teaching in schools. The credential program is structured so that students select to pursue either multiple (k-8) or single subject (6–12) certification; single subject candidates specialize in a content area such as English or math, and some choose to pursue a credential in more than one area. Given that subject matter competency is assumed at the start of fifth year programs, teacher education courses do not provide substantive content area preparation. There is one semester long course at both the multiple and single subject levels dedicated specifically to literacy instruction, and these go by the names *Early Literacy* and *Academic Literacy* respectively. While literacy instruction is woven throughout many other courses in the teacher education curriculum - *The Education of Bilingual Children*, for example - candidates generally report that they would like to have additional preparation in enacting literacy strategies with diverse learners.

At the secondary level, the certification courses do not go far enough to help novices across disciplines form identities as literacy teachers. Though they may study the teaching of discipline-specific terminology or ways of making texts accessible in their single subject *Curriculum and Instruction* course, not all candidates come to the *Academic Literacy* course seeing literacy development as their responsibility. A primary purpose of the course, therefore, is to help them adopt this identity and to reposition themselves as language teachers within their disciplinary instruction of math or science or history.

EXPANDING LITERACY DEFINITIONS AND APPLYING THEM TO PRACTICE: *ACADEMIC LITERACY* IN THREE ACTS

The *Academic Literacy* course described in this chapter strives to address the key issues in literacy instruction outlined above by drawing upon three strands of scholarship. First, the course works to help new teachers problematize the traditional notion that literacy instruction is the domain of English teachers alone, and that literate people are just good readers and writers. Second, rather than serve as a survey course of possible literacy strategies that teachers can use, *Academic Literacy* strives to help novice teachers hone in on "high leverage" (Ball, et al., 2009) practices that are linked with student success and can be taught in the setting of a teacher education classroom. Finally, the course challenges new teachers to consider the purposes of

literacy instruction and the ways that schools provide or deny students access to rich literacy environments based on the practices and resources of those environments. Drawing upon Moje's (2007) distinction between teaching for social justice and social justice pedagogy, the student teachers consider how students have access to literacy instruction and what it looks like when they do.

Challenging Popular Conceptions of Literacy

The *Academic Literacy* course takes student teachers through three distinct curriculum units that are designed to challenge their assumptions about literacy - and literate people - before we examine and then apply teaching strategies that we can use to develop literacy across content areas. Beginning with the following quote from Jerome Bruner (1987), which boldly sits at the center of the first page of my syllabus, we start to unpack the idea that we make meaning together as we draw upon what we can "read" in the world around us (Freire & Macedo, 1987). In essence, effective communication and comprehension are about more than being a good reader and writer of printed text.

> So if one asks the question, where is the meaning of social concepts - in the world, in the meaner's head, or in interpersonal negotiation - one is compelled to answer that it is the last of these … If one is arguing about social 'realities' like democracy or equity or even gross national product, the reality is not the thing, not in the head, but in the act of arguing and negotiating the meaning of such concepts. Social realities are not bricks that we trip over or bruise ourselves on when we kick at them, but the meanings that we achieve by the sharing of human cognitions.

By taking up the idea that literacy is socially constructed and that our identities as literate people are dependent on who we are with and in what contexts, candidates begin to challenge their assumptions about what it means to be literate and how literacy develops. Over the first weeks of the course, students consider this topic from a variety of different angles, including how literacy identities can be shaped by gender, social class, and race (e.g., Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Gee's (1992) distinction between discourses and Discourses (with a capital D) serves as a particularly useful heuristic for helping candidates problematize the notion that literacy is something static that we can learn and keep rather than being plastic and context specific. Gee contends that discourses are the ways that we communicate, through language and words and syntax, but that all communication is bound up in Discourses (with a capital "D") that are governed by the social rules, specific vocabularies, and norms relating to larger constructs such as gender, class, race, and culture. Grappling with these ideas allows candidates to consider how each of us is more or less literate in particular Discourses, and that our literacy identities can shift over the course a day as we move from our kitchens to the bus to the synagogue to soccer practice to the cafeteria where we serve food. The implications for school seem great, given

that students are being asked to continuously shuffle between classrooms, subject matters, and social settings where they will feel varying degrees of competency as literate people.

The first phase of the course extends the discussion of Discourses to take up the question of how students are already literate in ways that teachers often overlook. By inviting the candidates to question their assumptions regarding the resources, supports, and skills of students from diverse backgrounds (B. Flores, et al., 1991), candidates discuss the communicative assets that their diverse students bring to school and how instruction can begin with what students already know and are able to do. Learning about students' "underground literacies" (Beers, 2007) such as blogging or gaming, for example, can help teachers tap into students' interests and motivations. Understanding students' cultural ways of communicating can help teachers connect new material with the skills and knowledge that students already possess (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 2001).

In order to press the idea that all language is literate and linguistically valid (Lippi-Green, 1997), the first phase of the course concludes with an in depth examination of language variation and of African American English (AAE) in particular. As literacy teachers, I want the candidates to understand that language bias plays an important role in shaping the literacy identities of students (Dickar, 2004; B. Flores, et al., 1991), and that teachers can enhance literacy instruction by understanding, respecting, and validating the language that students bring into their classrooms. An important aspect of literacy instruction is helping students understand the differences between academic discourse and other forms of communication so that they can become accomplished "code-switchers" who have a range of language options at their command (Baker, 2002). By studying the linguistic rules that govern non-standard language like AAE, the candidates learn how to help their students become "language detectives" who are critically aware of how popular conceptions of literacy function as a gatekeeper in school and in society.

The final project for this phase of the course is a Literacy History, where the candidates describe their own literacy journey in relation to that of a student who they have chosen to interview from their fieldwork classroom. The purpose of the project is for candidates to consider the similarities and differences between their experiences and those of their students, and to think deeply about what they can learn about a student's understandings and beliefs about language. Even after several weeks of redefining literacy as a class, the candidates are often surprised by the assumptions they have made about the student they interviewed and the varied literacy practices of their students outside of school.

High Leverage Literacy Practices

The second phase of the course addresses literacy instruction more explicitly. Candidates work in interdisciplinary groups to explore strategies for supporting students' reading, writing, and oral communication skills using a range of tools

for modeling language and scaffolding student practice. Rather than try to "cover the waterfront" (Kosnik & Beck, 2009) of literacy strategies and risk presenting teaching tools as a sort of "bag of tricks," I try to focus on "high leverage practices" (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Ball, et al., 2009) that are at the core of what literacy teachers must accomplish if they are to help students learn. Deborah Ball and her colleagues outline criteria for identifying high leverage practices in the teaching of math, emphasizing the importance of practices that are central to the discipline, that are frequently enacted, that apply to multiple instructional topics, and that are likely to improve student learning (Ball, et al., 2009). They also stress that these activities must be teachable by "decomposing" complex tasks into skills that can be practiced in the settings of teacher education coursework (Grossman et al., 2009).

Because literacy instruction is interdisciplinary and broadly focused on helping students make sense of a range of multimodal and multi-representational texts, it is easy to see how high leverage literacy practices might seem general or not necessarily focused on the particular work of literacy instruction. For example, teachers regularly present vocabulary across content areas - often in lists with definitions on the board or on an overhead - and students memorize the words so that they can use them correctly on a test or in a lab later in the week. While vocabulary instruction is widespread and necessary in some forms, I want literacy teachers to learn high leverage practices for introducing new words, explaining and contextualizing new meanings, and supporting students as they use the new words in new ways. In *Academic Literacy*, candidates can practice explaining and representing new words while also considering their role in modeling the use of new language and situating it within the broader concepts under study.

Whole-class discussions of content are a key literacy practice across disciplines. Accomplished discussion facilitation is complex, though candidates are frequently unable to "see" the work of experienced teachers as they respond to student contributions or navigate student understandings. In order to slow down and "decompose" (Grossman, et al., 2009) the work of discussion facilitation so that candidates can analyze and practice the different aspects of the teacher's role, this phase of the course concludes with a multi-step discussion unit where candidates observe and enact facilitation practices using a variety of representations and tools.

For example, I begin the unit by modeling discussion facilitation in class, and then we explicitly debrief the strategies that I used. We also examine discussion transcripts from different disciplines to consider what students seem to be learning through talk and how. Through the analysis of videos of whole-class discussions across grade levels and content areas, we study the ways that teachers can empower students to take the floor and marshal nuanced interpretations. Finally, the candidates videotape themselves leading discussions in the field, and then facilitate discussions about their discussions with their peers when we return to class the following week. Throughout the discussion unit, candidates are encouraged to think about how each mode of representation enhanced their understanding of discussion facilitation, and

they are asked to reflect on their evolving understanding of the role of the teacher in leading classroom talk.

Opportunities to Learn in School Literacy Environments

The final phase of the course invites candidates to look across the data that they have gathered over the semester in order to characterize the literacy opportunities that are available to students across content areas. The data come primarily from course assignments and artifacts from the candidates' teaching. Data include, but are not limited to:

- Interview notes with focal students for the Literacy History project;
- Texts from content area instruction;
- Samples of student work, which we have assessed together in class for both assets and areas for growth;
- Notes and sometimes transcripts from student "think aloud" reading assessments, including the texts that were used;
- Evidence of multimodal tools for teaching content such as websites, videos, presentations, blogs, and other ways of representing information;
- Evidence from the classroom walls and other public spaces of vocabulary and comprehension strategies such as word walls, visuals, algorithms, etc.;
- Videotapes of discussions in the candidates' classrooms, including transcripts and an analysis of the content under study.

To provide a framework for the candidates' analysis of the opportunities that students will have to engage literacy-rich disciplinary activities, we draw upon Moje's (2007) distinction between "socially just pedagogy" and "social justice pedagogy." While both terms recognize that students must have access to the knowledge and skills that are valued in society, the terms also provide a distinction that is useful in considering the purposes and outcomes of literacy instruction. Socially just pedagogy is concerned with ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to learn, while social justice pedagogy is more concerned with the critical literacy skills that will be required for students to consume and produce knowledge on their own. As I have argued elsewhere, in literacy instruction "this distinction frames the difference between teaching that draws on and celebrates students' myriad linguistic and cultural backgrounds on the one hand, and teaching that goes further to empower students to become producers and critics of new literacies on the other" (Miller, et al., 2011, pp. 65).

The Literacy Case where the candidates present their analysis asks them to integrate what they have learned about students' abilities and interests with how students are invited to engage in literacy activities in school, and to what extent. A goal of the assignment is to focus candidates' attention on the role that teachers play in constructing and facilitating learning environments for students with an eye toward how the candidates will take up particular practices when they are the teachers of record the following year.

CHALLENGES

For candidates who are immersed (and perhaps even submerged) in both coursework and fieldwork, the *Academic Literacy* course runs the risk of seeming redundant or reductionist or both. Rather than being a part of the spiral curriculum (Bruner, 1960) for teacher preparation, candidates can dismiss the intensive focus on literacy as either too nuanced or too obviously intertwined with everything else they are learning in their teacher education program. As one candidate, Emily, wrote in the introduction to her Literacy Case project:

> I'm going to take a somewhat embarrassing risk and admit that I spent a great deal of the first part of this semester confused as to what academic literacy actually is. When described, the concept of the class seemed to make sense enough: A course designed to help learning teachers offer students the best possible access to their respective courses. Then again, didn't we cover that in [other classes]?

As a teacher educator, my challenge is to make sure that courses like *Academic Literacy* are sufficiently linked with what the candidates are seeing in the field, and sufficiently accessible in terms of what candidates can take away for ready use in their own classrooms. Linking teacher education coursework to what teachers actually do in the field is an essential goal, but it is also true that my courses must then keep pace with the rapid changes that are taking place in the field and in society.

A related challenge is that at the time this book is being published, schools across the U.S. are preparing to implement the new Common Core Standards in many content areas. A state-led initiative facilitated by the National Governors Association for Best Practices, the Common Core Standards were developed by teachers and other education experts to bring clarity to the guidelines that schools follow to prepare children for both college and work. Though the standards themselves hold a great deal of promise for increased coherence and rigor in some content areas, the implementation process itself promises some level of confusion across schools and districts. Implementation is almost never even, and it will be important for teacher educators to engage in this process directly. Given the traditional divide between the university and the field, the structures for this sort of collaboration are frequently fragile or missing.

MOVING FORWARD

With the advent of online learning and even online learning communities, traditional learning environments are being reconceptualized and perhaps even challenged. Gee (2007) and others have pressed us to consider what particular literacy skills can be learned in virtual environments, and how they afford new opportunities for teaching. For example, educators from around the world are constructing "schools" in Second Life, a virtual world where participants interact as personalized avatars

that can engage in complex activities. In a multi-semester experiment, I took my entire *Academic Literacy* class into Second Life together to see what we - as relative outsiders - might be able to learn about the Discourses for participating in virtual worlds. While I eventually abandoned that unit because I felt the student teachers needed more structure and guidance than I could provide in one or two class sessions in order to make the journey into a virtual world educative enough to warrant the time in class, I am keenly aware that literacy instructors will be called upon to make sense of these opportunities and we cannot shy away from seriously considering what teachers need to know about what students can learn by participating in these rapidly developing virtual spaces.

I would also like to investigate what teachers understand about the purpose and impact of focusing on particular high leverage practices such as instructional explanations. Though we spend considerable time over the semester breaking down different aspects of teaching, the candidates reflections at the end of the course indicate that they understand literacy practices as more of a general approach rather than a set of specific skills and understandings. For example, Emily continued:

> Though my skepticism clung on, eventually … academic literacy melded into one great picture of how these different modes of instruction are distinct from, though vitally engrained in, every field of teaching. Without this realization, and by default the combination of experiences that led me to it, I would undoubtedly be an inferior teacher. Given my extreme uncertainty about the concept of academic literacy at the beginning of the semester, I am almost confounded to say that I now see it is perhaps the most important tool we can give students. I feel passionate about incorporating the development of academic literacy into instructional practices and student activities in order to make content more accessible, enable students' success, and build scholars who can produce these very texts themselves.

Though Emily indicates that some of my broad course objectives have been reached, her readiness to enact particular literacy practices remains elusive.

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AFFILIATION

Peter Williamson
University of San Francisco