


Editorial



In order to be read, a poem, an equation, a painting, a dance, a novel, or a contract each requires a distinctive form of literacy, when literacy means ... a way of conveying meaning through and recovering meaning from the form of representation in which it appears. (Eisner, 1997, p. 353)

In September 1994, at a landmark meeting, a group of ten eminent scholars¹ from different corners of the world, gathered in New London, New Hampshire to discuss the future of literacy teaching and learning. Their plan was to use their diverse areas of expertise in language education to interrogate and flesh out some future directions for literacy. They were concerned about the repercussions that would follow the burgeoning standards movement, the need to respond more quickly to the “increasing multiplicity of and integration of significant modes of meaning” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 5) and the need for more critical pedagogies to respond specifically, innovatively, and sensitively to the literacy needs of diverse literacy learners in a fast-changing, globalized world. The term “multiliteracies” emerged in their discussions. They latched onto this word because it reflects the changing nature of literacy. It embraces the “necessity for an open-ended and flexible functional grammar which assists language learners to describe language differences (cultural, subcultural, regional/national, technical, context-specific, and so on) and the multimodal channels of meaning now so important to communication” (p. 6).

They were not alone at this time in their search for new ways of thinking about literacy teaching and learning. These same issues were being grappled with in other domains with slightly different emphases, for example, by critical theorists (Giroux, 1988), and by artist educators (Eisner, 1991), which resulted in a growing interest in media studies and arts-based pedagogy and research, and fruitful exchanges across disciplines. It is imperative that these discussions continue.

In this fifth issue of LEARNing Landscapes, and in a time when educators continue to explore the exciting possibilities that “multiliteracies” offer and respond to the increasing responsibilities that are part of our digital, multicultural, and globalized world, we are pleased to feature salient commentaries from John Willinsky, Susan Church, Vivian Paley, and Anne Haas Dyson. These eminent educators all have made substantial contributions to language education over many years. An added highlight is an interview with Sonora Lemieux, Shannon Prevost O’Dowd, and Benoît Mallette who are grade-six students from Courtland Park International School in Saint-Bruno, Quebec. These interesting and varying commentaries provide a reflective and engaging backdrop for the articles that follow.

Willinsky suggests that missing from the literacy landscape, and more important and nuanced than ever, is a focus on the intellectual properties of literacy. He argues that students are involved in the creation of intellectual property from a very young age, yet know little about how it works in and outside of educational settings, or how it is valued and economically driven. It is only when students have the opportunities to experience and reflect on the intellectual properties of literacy that they will truly understand why literacy matters.

Church reminisces about the pendulum swing in literacy education of which she has been a part over the past thirty years. She chronicles her journey from basal reading programs, through the excitement of the whole language era, to the tightening reforms of the 1990s with the resurgence of standardized tests and predetermined literacy programs. She garners some hope from the reflective and critical stance that has emerged with the “new literacies” movement and argues for more dialogue to avoid rigid, oppositional stances that characterize the search for one, right answer and yet another pendulum swing.

Paley travels the terrain of kindergarten, marveling in retrospect how all the things she, her colleagues, and young students were doing over many years were rarely articulated as literacy. She describes how she studiously avoided the “three R’s” of first grade and instead concentrated on what she calls the “three F’s” of emergent literacy, that of fantasy, friendship, and fairness. She illustrates these dimensions with lively anecdotes of engaged, playful, and thriving learners. In a final, poignant story she juxtaposes the muting effect of narrow instruction with the unleashing effect on literacy development that occurs in play.

Haas Dyson, in a warm interview, provides her commentary on the relationship among language, culture and the positive impact of play. She discusses passionately

how emerging literacies can be cultivated by adults in the real and everyday worlds of children by helping them make meaning of their environmental contexts in multi-modal ways both in and out of school. She advocates strongly for contextual and cultural sensitivity in literacy teaching and learning to counter the existing inequities among students and the deficit notions about literacy development.

Lemieux, Prevost O'Dowd, and Mallette speak candidly and confidently about their interpretations of what literacy means to them, and provide interesting insights about what they consider to be optimal learning experiences. Their commentaries suggest how much can be learned from students themselves even at young ages.

It seemed a very appropriate way to transition from the commentaries to the articles by beginning with a series of poems by Georgia Heard, a well-known poet/educator who continues to inspire educators world-wide with insights from her work. This poetry cluster combined with reflective comments, which she entitles "Weaving Tales and Leaving Trails," speaks to rigidities often inherent in schooled literacy, and the connection between literacy development and nature. Her final poem describes a poignant moment of collective literacy learning.

Côté, Kingsley, Reilly, McPhail, Friesen, Dias and Shore, Birlean, Walker, Ritchie, Aulls, and LaBanca all focus on various forms and ways of literacy learning in classrooms. Côté, an author and illustrator of children's books, spends much of her time in classrooms encouraging early literacy and creativity through books and related experiences. She shows with examples the important links between drawing and reading and how making sense of words and images is very much about the connection between what is on the page and the experiences the reader brings to the act. Kingsley, a recent graduate of McGill University who is teaching at Lower Canada College in Montreal, offers a creative and effective approach she has developed in early reading instruction that helps children to understand the reading process and to develop metacognitive skills to help them talk about their reading and learning. Reilly, who is currently the Director of Professional Learning in the Morris School District in New Jersey, shows how ten-year olds conversing with each other about what they think they are learning while engaged in a layered activity of finger painting, move from mimetic to expressive and iconic forms of representation. These visual products are then used as a basis to compose poetry about how they learn. She suggests that transmediation, or the process of making meaning from a variety of symbol systems, develops different cognitive skills, and ultimately enhances the work that is produced. McPhail, an early childhood teacher at Shady Hill School in Cambridge,

Massachusetts, discusses the importance of close observation and reflection in practitioner inquiry. He describes how over a year he closely observed and documented his students' activities and his reflections about them. He realized that when he allowed David, the class "bad boy," to pursue his personal interests in writing, this youngster was able to move away from his bad-boy image and to begin to express himself in genres with which he was comfortable. This in turn engendered friendships with his peers and helped David abandon his isolating, bad-boy stance. Friesen, a Ph.D. student in Elementary Education at the University of Alberta, builds on the work that has shown that the introduction of therapy dogs into personal or classroom contexts changes the nature of the atmosphere, and in the case of her particular classroom, helped to motivate, engage, and promote risk taking in literacy learning. The next article, by Dias, an Emeritus Professor of Education at McGill University, describes his passion to make poetry matter. He discusses his research with grade-eleven and subsequently grade-six students and shows how they moved from uncertainty about and dislike of poetry, and a dependency on the teacher to be a mediator between the reader and the text, to become engaged, confident consumers of poetry. Shore, a Professor of Educational Psychology at McGill University; Birlean, a Ph.D. student in Educational Psychology at McGill University; Walker, an M.A. student in School/Applied Child Psychology, at McGill University; Ritchie a Consulting Scientist at the I.W. Killam Children's and Women's Health Centre in Halifax; Aulls, a Professor of Educational Psychology at McGill University; and LaBanca, an instructor at Western Connecticut State University, collaboratively make a case for including inquiry literacy as one of the important multiliteracies in curricula. They express the need for students to be exposed to inquiry early on in schooling so that they can develop an increasing metacognitive ability that will allow them not only to carry out, but also to name and understand the inquiry concepts and processes in which they are involved.

Anderson, Kettner and Maguire all speak to the kinds of re-positionings that have by necessity taken place in first language and second language education with the expanding notions of literacy. Anderson, who is the Coordinator of Curriculum for the teaching of English Language Arts at the Quebec Ministry of Education, Recreation and Sports, argues persuasively for the need to include non-traditional texts in the learning repertoires of students throughout schooling. It is only by acquiring the necessary knowledge to critically appraise and interpret the multiple forms of representations students encounter daily that they will be able to participate fully in both their personal and public lives. Kettner, a Literacy Consultant for the English Montreal School Board, briefly and cogently traces the age-old, polarized literacy debate that pits those with broader, "multiliteracy leanings" against those who focus

on the centrality of reading taught through explicit instruction. He suggests that these dichotomous, paradigm “wars” should be put aside, but cautions that the compromise suggested in “balanced literacy” approaches can be overly simplistic, neglecting the complexities and attention to diversity necessary for literacy development. He advocates for asking different questions and exploring possible answers in collaborative research between academics and teachers in classrooms. Maguire, who is a Professor of Education at McGill University, examines the evolving literacy landscape over the last forty years, and with excellent examples, the re-positionings she has experienced through “children’s disruptions,” or those moments when a child involved in a literacy event has inadvertently unsettled her thinking. Her work has shown that despite the strides that have been made in multiliteracy research, there has been little emphasis on “heritage literacy” and the faces of literacies in non-dominant language groups, suggesting that some forms of literacy still count more than others.

Last, but certainly not least, Sandra Jack-Malik and Miao Sun, Patricia Leavy, Shelley Tracey, and Joe Norris all focus on literacy teaching and learning in adult contexts. Jack-Malik and Miao Sun are both Ph.D. students in Elementary Education at the University of Alberta. They use narrative inquiry to examine their personal stories that unfolded as they participated, the former as teacher and the latter as student, in an informally created English Second Language (ESL) learning group. They describe how they began to question their respective beliefs during this experience, and how their identities shifted as a result. Their work provides important insights on how international ESL students might be better served in academic communities. Leavy, an Associate Professor of Sociology at Stonehill College in Easton, Massachusetts, makes a case for using art-based approaches in teaching an undergraduate media literacy course. She shows with interesting examples how the evocative, emotional and embodied nature of the arts can be used to span differences, unsettle hegemonic beliefs, create critical consciousness and enhance the overall learning. Tracey, the Coordinator of a teacher education program for adult literacy practitioners in the School of Education at Queen’s University, Belfast, also argues for the use of arts-based approaches to enhance conceptualizations of literacy. In her study, she used a range of arts-based activities, such as images, poetry, storytelling, and collage-making for exploring different ways to make meaning and understand literacy practices. Her positive results suggest that more arts-based approaches should be incorporated into teacher education curricula, but also that more work is needed to develop relevant criteria for evaluating these types of processes and products. Finally, Norris, a Professor of Humanities at Brock University, brings the discussion back to the informal occasions of literacy learning that Heard began with in the opening article of this

issue. He describes in a candid narrative how he and his brother found themselves engaged in their own literacy learning while they tried to help their adolescent nephew/son with his reading. This article gives credence to the idea that our literacies, even the more traditional ones such as reading, are forever evolving and developing throughout our lives.

L.B.K.

Notes

1. Courtney Cazden, Norman Fairclough, James Gee, Mary Kalantzis, Gunther Kress, Allan Luke, Carmen Luke, Sarah Michaels, Martin Nakata, and Joseph Lo Bianco.

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