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Innovative Practice in Teaching the English Language Arts: Building Bridges Between Literacy In School and Out

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Part 2

The Student in Learning Innovation

Innovative Practice in Teaching the English Language Arts: Building Bridges Between Literacy In School and Out

Michael W. Smith

The research that Jeff Wilhelm and I did on the literate lives of adolescent boys both in and out of school (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) was motivated by the fact that all available data demonstrates that boys underperform girls on measures of reading and writing. This underperformance is sometimes attributed to boys' rejection of reading because they see it as a feminized, or at least as an inappropriate masculine activity (e.g., Martino, 1994, 1998). As a consequence, we began our research with the expectation that the young men in our study would reject literacy. But, strikingly, they didn't. Instead, we found that all of the boys in our study were actively engaged in literacy outside school. Their rejection of school literacy, therefore, has to be seen not as a function of their attitude toward literacy in general but rather as a comment on the particular kinds of literate activity they typically encounter in school. In this chapter, I'll argue that a powerful educational innovation would involve capitalizing on adolescents' engagement in literacy outside school by building bridges between what they do out of school and what we want them to do in school.

Some Good News and Some Bad

First, some background. Our study focused on a very diverse group of 49 boys from four different schools in three different states (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). The boys varied in terms of their ethnicities, social classes, and levels of academic achievement. We collected and analyzed four different kinds of data: an interview on our participants' favorite activities; an interview on their responses to a series of short profiles that highlight different ways of being literate; three monthly interviews on the literacy logs that the boys kept in which they tracked

all of the reading, writing, listening, and viewing they did in and out of school; and think-aloud protocols on four stories that differed in terms of the sex of the main character and the relative emphasis on action versus character.

As I noted above, one of our chief findings stands in stark contrast to conventional wisdom about boys and literacy. Far from rejecting literacy, ALL of the boys in the study embraced reading in one form or another, though only seven of them were book readers. Surprisingly, this embrace was especially clear in

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remarks from the boys who struggled most with school literacy. For example, Mick, a 10th grader and functional illiterate, regularly bought four magazines (one each on cars, model cars, professional wrestling, and hip hop) despite living in very dire economic circum-

stances. He'd look at the pictures and then find someone to read to him when the picture told him that the magazine included something he needed to know.

So, the good news is that young men value literacy. The bad news is that they tend not to value the kind of literacy that matters in school. Mick, for example, yearned to read and identified his own problems as "I don't read that good." But what he yearned to read was not what was assigned in school. He wasn't alone on that score. Brandon, a highly competent reader, warned us "not to confuse this [my school reading] with my real reading [what he was pursuing at home]." His "real reading" was about "stuff that interests me," stuff that would help him pursue his real world interests in the here and now.

Our findings resonate with those of other researchers who have examined adolescents' out-of-school literacies. For example, Weinstein (2009) studied the out-of-school writing of nine urban adolescents from Chicago, primarily their raps and spoken-word poetry. She argues that her research helps educators understand the "funds of knowledge" (Moll & Greenberg, 1990) upon which students could draw if they were given the opportunity to do so, though the writers themselves saw little connection between what they must do in school and the writing they freely chose to do outside school. Studies in this tradition have a hortatory function (cf. Smith & Moore, 2012), encouraging literacy educators to recognize "the power that literacy has for young people of all classes and ethnoracial descriptions" (Weinstein, 2009, p. 159).

Why do students who are deeply committed to literacy reject school literacy? Dewey (1916) provides one possible explanation: "Children live proverbially in the present; that is not a fact to be evaded, but it is an excellence!" (p. 55). However, according to Dewey, educators too often see education solely as preparation for the future, which works against the power of the present moment, resulting in "a loss of impetus" and promoting an attitude of "shilly-shallying and procrastination." Dewey further argues that this future orientation keeps

teachers from focusing on the specific human beings who are their students. Instead of seeking a thorough understanding of who their students are in the present and directing instruction to their students' current selves, educators base their instruction on "a vague and wavering opinion" (p. 55) of what their students may be expected to become. Dewey then discusses a final problem with future-based teaching:

Finally, the principle of preparation makes necessary recourse on a large scale to the use of adventitious motives of pleasure and pain. The future having no stimulating and directing power when severed from the possibilities of the present, something must be hitched on to make it work. Promises of reward and threats of pain are employed. Healthy work, done for present reasons and as a factor in living, is largely unconscious. The stimulus resides in the situation with which one is actually confronted. But when this situation is ignored, pupils have to be told that if they do not follow the prescribed course, penalties will accrue; while if they do, they may expect, some time in the future, rewards for their present sacrifices. Everybody knows how largely systems of punishment have had to be resorted to by educational systems which neglect present possibilities in behalf of preparation for the future. (pp. 55-56)

An Innovative Possibility

A way to engage kids in the healthy work of the present is to use their out-of-school literacies as bridges to developing their canonical literacies. Lee, for example, has long championed the transformative power of drawing on students' cultural resources, the everyday literate practices in which students engage, what she calls "cultural modeling." Her line of inquiry began nearly 20 years ago with the publication of a research report (1993) that demonstrates the effectiveness of using African American students' understanding of signifying, a form of ritual insult, that includes "playin' the dozens" (e.g., "Yo mama so dumb she thought a quarterback was a refund."); "sounding" (i.e., when conversational partners try to outdo each other by building one insult upon another using the same theme); and "marking" (i.e., sarcastically emulating the words of another). Students were given three dialogues of extended signifying taken from Mitchell-Kernan's (1981) research and were asked to interpret what each speaker in the dialogue meant by each conversational turn, as well as the criteria they employed to determine the meaning. Students generated a set of criteria comparable to those that expert readers use to understand irony in literature, according to Booth (1974) and Smith (1991). Students in the cultural modeling group improved in their

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comprehension of literature from pretest to posttest over twice as much as did students in a control group.

In a recent review, Ball, Skerrett, and Martinez (2011) discuss the potential power of such an approach, though they note the need for additional research and more funding to do that research. Another testimony to the power of cultural modeling is the extent to which Lee's ground-breaking work has been generative for other scholars seeking ways to leverage the power of cultural practices employed out of school to develop academic understandings. Orellana and Reynolds (2008), for example, studied how Mexican immigrant children's experience translating for their families might be employed in teaching them how to paraphrase texts, an important academic skill.

Related work is grounded in a new literacies perspective that holds, according to Morrell (2002), that marginalized students are indeed highly literate but that "their literacies have little connection with the dominant literacies promoted in public schools" (p. 72). He details a unit of instruction in which he and his students used hip-hop music as a lens to understand canonical poetry and reports that his students

generated quality interpretations and made interesting connections between the canonical poems and the rap songs....Their critical investigations of popular texts brought about oral and written critiques similar to those required by college preparatory English classrooms. (p. 72)

In a similar vein, Hill's (2009) study of students' engagement in an after-school, hip-hop curriculum demonstrates that students who were alienated from school could nonetheless act as "cultural critics who deploy critical literacies in order to identify and respond to structures of power and meaning within hip-hop texts" (p. 122). Also operating in this theoretical tradition, Vasudevan (2010) argues that "definitions of literacy and learning that operate in schools today are often far removed from the actual practices in which children and youth engage" (para. 5). She makes the compelling point that urban youth "live digital lives" but are "confined to analog rights in school" (para. 5) because of the policies prohibiting the use of mobile technologies in which they are expert. Her case study of one adolescent demonstrates how his smartphone "provided a chance to participate in new discursive communities; to take on and be recognized for new identities; and to gain new audiences for his writing" (para. 46).

A closely related perspective, that of multiliteracies, was introduced by the New London Group (1996) who called for a pedagogy centered on the notion of design and the recognition that

increasingly important are modes of meaning other than linguistic, including visual meanings (images, page layouts, screen formats); audio meanings (music, sound effects); gestural meanings (body language, sensuality); spatial meanings (the meanings of environmental spaces, architectural spaces); and multimodal meanings. Of the modes of meaning, the multimodal is the most

significant, as it relates all the other modes in quite remarkably dynamic relationships. (p. 80)

In this same tradition, Alvermann (Alvermann & Moore, 2011) notes that “interactive communication technologies and a definitional broadening of *text* to include moving images, words, sounds, gestures, and performances support the folding of literacy practices, regardless of their place of origin” (p. 157). When such folding occurs, according to Alvermann, “research suggests that youth-produced digital media texts generated in classrooms provide opportunities for students to examine their identities in relation to a curriculum’s master narratives and to push back with their own counterstories” (p. 157), with the result that kids who were on the margins of classroom life may no longer be so. Alvermann closes her argument by suggesting a sieve metaphor for “noticing relationships between in-school and out-of-school literacy learning that have been obscured previously” (p. 158). In like manner, Dyson (1999) has called for schools to develop curricula that are “permeable”—that is, that allow free movement between what students do inside and outside of school.

Hip hop, spoken word, digitalk, gaming, and fan fiction are popular forms of out-of-school literate activity, ones that are sure to resonate with many adolescents.

Consider what could follow if these metaphors prevail. Turner (2010) notes that teachers and the popular press present texting and other forms of what she calls “digitalk” as enemies of literacy teachers. She argues that “rather than seeing it as a deficiency, a lazy representation of Standard English, we should recognize its power in the digital, adolescent community” (p. 46) and that we should use students’ understanding of texting as a way to help them become conscious of the language choices they make.

In a similar fashion, Abrams (2009) has documented the potential benefits of gaming, another practice long thought to be an enemy to literacy teachers. More specifically, her research documents how gaming helped three struggling 11th grade students develop understandings that enabled them to learn classroom material.

Roozen (2009) makes a similar argument in his study of how writing fan fiction—that is, fiction that fans of a movie, television show, book, or story write employing the characters or storyline of the source text—supported one student’s trajectory into graduate school English studies. That student explained the support she experienced:

I don’t think that I ever thought of them as separate. I’ve always been combining them. When we read the *Masque of the Red Death* in 10th grade, I wrote a funny play version of it using the people in the class as characters, and when I showed it to the teacher she let us [perform] it for class. And so even back then, like I rewrote *Everyman*, the medieval play, with my own characters in

it and that kind of thing, so I've always been combining school work and fan fiction. (p. 148)

Hip hop, spoken word, digitalk, gaming, and fan fiction are popular forms of out-of-school literate activity that are sure to resonate with many adolescents. A permeable curriculum could also allow students to make use of their unique out-of-school literacies in service of developing traditional academic literacies and, in doing so, personalizing their instruction in some fashion. In one example of permeable curriculum, Wilson and Boatright (2011) provide a case study analysis of an American Indian student for whom grass dancing was central to his identity. He danced in full regalia at his school's talent show. But he also was allowed to bring his expertise into the classroom. His teacher shared a compact disc the student had compiled on intertribal music. The student also explained videos of American Indian dancing to several language arts classes. Wilson and Boatright attribute the case participant's success as a communicator to be a function of his being allowed to "combine and use modes whose affordances offset and complemented other modes' affordances and constraints" (p. 274).

The list could go on and on. Smagorinsky (2011), for example, discusses his investigations of a wide variety of literacies, from drawing to choreography to model building to mask making. Taken together, Smagorinsky's studies provide compelling evidence of the power of these alternative forms of literate engagement.

Interestingly, the arguments made by the sociocultural thinkers cited above resonate with perspectives of cognitive scholars. One of the most important educational insights from cognitive science over the last 50 years is schema theory, a theory that establishes that all learning proceeds by connecting the known to the new. If new knowledge is consistent with previous knowledge, it is added to existing schema—an organized set of knowledge pertaining to foundational ideas or processes—in an act called assimilation. If what was previously known is inconsistent, it must be accommodated to the new learning. Otherwise, people will not only fail to understand the new data, but they will also quickly revert to prior misconceptions (Science Media Group, 1989). Cognitive science, like sociocultural theory, teaches us that the only resource a learner can employ to learn something new is what she already knows and can do.

In summary, what is important here is not providing a comprehensive list of all the ways teachers of the English language arts have drawn on out-of-school literacies or all of the research and theory that supports doing so. Rather, what is important is to understand how generative the related perspectives of cultural modeling, new literacies, multiliteracies, and schema theory can be in fostering innovative teaching practices by encouraging teachers to recognize that what students do outside school can be a critically important resource in helping them do what they need to do inside school.

Barriers to Innovation

If the theory and research grounding the use of out-of-school literacies in the development of academic literacies has been in place for 20 years, what makes the practices innovative? They have not been adopted by schools to any significant extent. As Redding (2012) has argued, an innovation in learning occurs when a currently accepted standard of curricular or instructional practice is replaced by a more effective practice. Put simply, innovation in learning is changing what teachers do and how they do it to achieve better results for students.

That's a challenge because the innovative practices described above are at odds with some foundational assumptions of literacy teachers. In the first place, literacy teachers regard many of the new literacies as their enemies, something to be overcome rather than employed. Buck (2012) puts it this way:

Our continued disciplinary emphasis on static text, and our reliance on theories derived from print texts...not only puts us out of step with students and the larger culture, but also blinds us to many of the rhetorical affordances of new media. (p. 11)

Moreover, including the new literacies may challenge the assumptions about the very nature of literacy classrooms and how they work. A number of scholars have employed Bakhtin's (1981) concept of the chronotope to explain this nature. A classroom chronotope is a repeated pattern in the use of time and space, a way of being, if you will, that frames the way that students, teachers, literacy practices, and so on are understood. Matusov (2009), for example, argues that the chronotope of the conventional classroom positions the teacher as sole authority. The theoretical traditions that call for embracing out-of-school literacies position students as experts. Prior (1998) explains that the chronotope of traditional classrooms "sever[s] relations of the classroom to other times and places" and that it presents "persons only in their institutional capacities, obscuring other activity footings or social identities within the classroom itself" (p. 251). The theoretical traditions that call for embracing out-of-school literacies seek to employ rather than obscure other activity footings and social identities.

Second, a recent educational initiative, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), seems likely to make things worse and inhibit real innovation. By their very nature, the CCSS reify the future directedness that Dewey critiques. The mission statement of the CCSS makes their future directedness clear:

The Common Core State Standards provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them. The standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers. With American students fully prepared for the future, our communities will be best positioned to compete

successfully in the global economy. (Council of Chief State School Officers & the National Governors Association Center, n.d.)

One might stipulate to the importance of the CCSS's goal of "ensur[ing] that all students are college and career ready in literacy no later than the end of high school" by "shift[ing] content...toward higher levels of cognitive demand" (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011, p. 106). However, the demands of the standards may militate against schools' making use of the funds of knowledge students have developed in their literate activity outside of school.

Although the standards' document explicitly says that the CCSS do not "define how teachers should teach" or describe "all that can or should be taught," (Council of Chief State School Officers & the National Governors Association Center, 2010), the English Language Arts Standards' emphasis on text complexity would seem to work against the likelihood that teachers would make increasing use of the prior knowledge students have gained in their extramural literate activities. Cunningham (in press) argues that "the most widely discussed reading instructional change called for by the CCSS is a significant increase in text complexity." He argues further that "those who have not read the standards and only listened to the chatter about them may well have concluded that this is the only major change in reading instruction the CCSS entails." That change would seem to work against attempts to make more use of the texts with which adolescents engage out of school as resources to draw on in their encounters with those readings. Indeed, the table in the CCSS document illustrating the complexity, quality, and range of student reading, Grades 6–12, is dominated by canonical literary (e.g., *Macbeth*) and informational texts (e.g., *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*).

In addition, David Coleman (2011), one of the chief authors of the CCSS and perhaps their most influential proponent, has promoted an approach to instruction that seems to be at odds with approaches that seek to bridge students' in-school and out-of-school literacies. Rather than encourage teachers to build textual bridges, he instead has encouraged teachers "to think of dispensing for a moment with all the apparatus we have built up before reading and plunge into reading the text. And let it be our guide into its own challenges. That maybe those challenges emerge best understood from the reading of it" (p. 17). Given the influence of standards and their assessments, such calls will almost certainly result in curricular and instructional retrenchment rather than the innovative expansion of curricular and instructional understandings signaled by research and theory exploring students' out-of-school literacies.

Finally, literacy teachers by and large have not been prepared to make use of students' out-of-school literacies. Gritter (2012) calls for teachers to employ permeable textual discussion that "values what students already know and can do and informs students they bring important schema to literature, allowing them

to interpret or recast texts in new and exciting ways” (p. 257). She recognizes, however, that the teachers she studied did not have the preparation to do so.

So What to Do?

Complex problems defy simple solutions; however, understanding the barriers to innovation points the way to developing action principles to overcome those barriers. The following five action principles could be enacted at the state, district, or school level.

Make sure that teachers and administrators understand the standards.

Misunderstandings of the CCSS abound, some, as I argued previously, promulgated by the authors of the standards themselves. The concerns that instruction employing students’ out-of-school literacies is not in line with the CCSS’s emphasis on text complexity can be reduced by understanding that the CCSS explicitly state that “the Standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach” and that they “do not define the intervention methods or materials necessary to support” students who may encounter difficulties in meeting the CCSS. It is also important to know what is in the standards themselves and what is in the ancillary materials designed to support their enactment. States voted to adopt the standards. They did not vote to accept the instructional ideas in those ancillary materials.

Reevaluate policies that create barriers to linking in-school and out-of-school literacies. Many schools ban the use of cell phones. It is hard to imagine sending a clearer signal that school and home are radically at odds. If, instead, schools allowed the responsible use of cell phones, teachers could begin to use them as powerful instructional tools. Texting is a fertile ground to develop important rhetorical understanding, but that’s just the tip of the iceberg. A search on the internet with the words “cell phones as instructional tools” yielded over 5,000,000 hits! A thoughtful cost-benefit analysis of this kind of policy may result in giving teachers and students access to powerful resources they currently do not employ.

Reevaluate curricular structures that create barriers to linking in-school and out-of-school literacies. Some traditional curricular structures make it difficult to enact the kind of innovative instruction called for here. A quick example: British and American literature classes are typically organized chronologically. Applebee, Burroughs, and Stevens (2000) found that teachers employing this organizational structure seldom engaged students in developing historical understandings that would support students’ interpretive work, so the benefits of such an organization are unclear. But the cost of not being able to put contemporary popular cultural and canonical literary texts into meaningful conversation is manifest.

Give ongoing support to both inservice and preservice teachers as they develop new practices. I’ve argued in this chapter that teachers may resist

employing students' out-of-school literacies because making use of them runs counter to the chronotope of the literacy classroom. That means that teachers who are working to change their practice will need plenty of support. The question is how to provide that support, given limited professional development resources. One innovative possibility is employing Indistar®, a sophisticated, web-based, change management system developed by the Academic Development Institute. Indistar's platform allows a school-based leadership team to assess the current implementation of effective practices with guidance from rubrics, research briefs, and coaches, and implement plans to improve the practices. The team determines the evidence necessary to confirm that the practices are fully implemented, and gathers and documents the evidence.

What's true for inservice teachers is true for preservice teachers as well. A wealth of research documents the disconnect faced by preservice teachers when they go into the field, a disconnect that echoes the research–practice divide discussed above. They often do not see the innovative practices espoused in their preparation programs being practiced in their schools. As Smagorinsky, Rhym, and Moore (2013) point out, these “competing centers of gravity” make it difficult to develop a coherent approach to teaching.

Juzwik and her colleagues (2012) offer one innovative approach to teacher education that may help preservice teachers overcome the problem of conflicting settings. They worked to foster dialogically organized classroom interactions through a pedagogy informed by multiliteracies using a Web 2.0-mediated process of video-based response and revision. Four times over the course of their internships, teacher candidates recorded videos of their teaching and posted them to an online social network, ultimately creating a culminating digital reflection on their materials. The interns also commented on each other's practices and reflected on the feedback they received from their colleagues and teachers. Instead of having their field of vision limited to one site, these preservice teachers and their university professors were able to see how the instruction advocated in their teacher preparation programs played out in multiple settings. Although the additional demands of the video-based response and revision created challenges both to the preservice teachers and their supervisors, Juzwik and her colleagues conclude that emerging digital technologies offer an “unprecedented opportunity” (p. 33) to reduce the university–schools divide and, in so doing, to create opportunities for preservice teachers to collaborate in developing effective practices over time.

Cast teachers as researchers. The gap between educational research and practice has been long lamented. Overcoming teachers' suspicion of educational research, powerful and long-held beliefs about the nature of their discipline, and their worries about preparing students to meet state and national standards makes clear that it will take far more than an occasional inservice program acquainting teachers with new practices and the research that supports them

to make them willing and able to make use of students' out-of-school literacies as instructional resources. McIntyre (2005) argues that one way to bridge the divide is to engage teachers in the evaluation of research-based practice in the context of their own practice. As I have argued elsewhere (Smith, Wilhelm, & Fredrickson, 2012), the CCSS can act as a lever to do just that. That is, if a curricular or instructional innovation can be shown to achieve the standards, then its implementation becomes far more likely. School teams of literacy educators could select particular approaches to drawing on students' out-of-school literacies, develop measures for testing the extent to which they achieve the CCSS, and share their findings.

Conclusion

Gritter (2012) offers an apt summary for the lines of research that support innovative ideas for making more use of students' out-of-school literacies: "A basic but profound truism of teaching and learning is that no one learns anything without knowing something first. Learning in classrooms is about connections made with prior knowledge and also with human beings" (pp. 257–258).

Particular suggestions for making connections between what students know and do outside of school with what they need to learn and do inside school abound. But those suggestions are far too seldom taken up by teachers. That's understandable given the barriers that exist for doing so. However, given the stakes of the game, accepting those barriers is unsustainable. Instead, schools must create structures to overcome them so that promising innovative practices can flourish.

Action Principles

For State Education Agencies

- a. Work with institutes of higher learning to encourage use of digital technologies to reflect on real-world teaching experiences.
- b. Re-evaluate policies that might create barriers to making best use of current technologies.

For Local Education Agencies

- a. Provide opportunities for professional development on ways to teach common core standards in individual contexts and cultures.
- b. Provide research materials to your teaching staff on new literacies and different ways of approaching literacy.
- c. Provide opportunities for teachers to focus on alternative ideas of how to teach literacy using less traditional materials.

For Teachers

- a. Be aware of the value of the non-standard literacy practices of your students and what is currently being used by them.
- b. Start where the student currently is in their reading practice and proceed from there.

- c. Expand the scope of required readings to include less traditional literacy of value.

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