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The South Carolina Council of Teachers of English welcomes contributions to *South Carolina English Teacher (SCET)*, a journal that represents varied perspectives, formats, and voices focusing on the teaching of English in our state. *SCET* publishes teacher research, critical essays, teaching strategies, bibliographies, interviews, personal essays, short stories, poetry, and other creative works including black and white photography and drawings. We invite original artwork for our cover design. Each manuscript should be no more than 12 double spaced, typed pages in current APA style. *SCET* is a blind, peer-reviewed journal. Place the author's personal and institutional identification including an e-mail address on the cover page only. Send three copies of the manuscript. In addition, please attach a copy of your manuscript in Word, subject heading, SCET, to mstyslin@mailbox.sc.edu. Submissions will not be returned. Deadline for submission for the Fall, 2009 issue of *SCET* is August 1, 2009. All submissions postmarked by this date will be considered. Send manuscripts to:

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Letter from the Editors

“Dutiful students,” writes Alfie Kohn (2008), “may be suffering from what the psychoanalyst Karen Horney famously called the ‘tyranny of the should’—to the point that they no longer know what they really want, or who they really are.” For teachers of English in a time of high-stakes testing and misguided accountability, we also know too well the “tyranny of the should”—though it is actually “shoulds.” The “should” of mandates often conflicts with the “should” of best practice.

Freire (1998) recognized the source of that tension: “The freedom that moves us, that makes us take risks, is being subjugated to a process of standardization of formulas and models in relation to which we are evaluated” (p. 102). Further, when researchers look closely at our practice they uncover serious disconnects: “Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) found that all the teachers in their study of eight ninth-grade suburban English classrooms believed it was important for their students, in the words of one, to ‘discuss, contribute, and offer original ideas.’ Observations of the classes, however, documented not even one second of such open-ended discussion” (Anagnostopoulos, Smith, & Nystrand, 2008, p. 5).

One act against this tyranny is the voice of the teacher; here, in these pages are voices raised and offered, acts of authentic *shoulds*.

In the first section, *Teacher Inquiry Matters*, Amy S. Johnson, in her “Overcoming History, Envisioning the Future: The Legacy of Literacy in One Community in the Rural South,” pursues her own intellectual curiosity: “Like Gadsden, I have been curious about the legacies of literacy that individuals living in rural communities in the South embody. To understand this phenomenon, I have interviewed African-American individuals of various ages about how they have learned and use literacy within their lives.” Then, Mary E. Styslinger, Deidre M. Clary, Victoria A. Oglan (with Dee Culbreth, Kelly Gerth, Erin Green, Mark McAbee, Libby Newman, Riley Thomas, Nicole Tune) address concerns about adolescent literacy in “Not No More: Content Teachers Making Sense of Adolescent Readers.” The third piece in this section, “Fighting the Big Mac Mentality: Attendance Policies and Performance in an Active Learning Environment,” Nancy Lawson Remler confronts the impact of attendance on authentic learning.

Tips for Teaching, our second section, opens with “Teaching for the Future: The Art of Collaboration through Wikis” by Sarah Hunt-Barron. Hunt-Barron shares her success with using wikis as part of her writers workshop with seventh-grade students. In her “Literature Circles and that Pesky Need for Assessment,” Debbie Bandy discusses her efforts to address assessment well within her commitment to literature circles.

Our *On My Mind* piece, Inga Puffer’s “A Glimpse into the ‘Good Old Days’: Stirring Lessons for S.C. Form Schools in Opit, Uganda” is a teacher narrative sharing one teacher’s reconsideration of her own assumptions after her experience teaching in Uganda.

Finally, in *From Our Pens*, Susan Culver Dobbins explores literature and literacy in her own original poem. Freire (1998) writes, “If education cannot do everything, there is something fundamental that it can do. In other words, if education is not the key to social transformation, neither is it simply meant to reproduce the dominant ideology” (p. 110). In other words, our English classes can be transformational, even in a time of “the tyranny of should.” The voices in this issue of *SCET* are a testament to just that.

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Overcoming History, Envisioning the Future: The Legacy of Literacy in One Community in the Rural South

... We solemnly urge the parents and guardians of the young and rising generation,
by the sad recollection of our forced ignorance and degradation in the past,
and by the bright and inspiring hopes of the future,
to see that schools are at once established in every neighborhood
(Proceedings of the Colored People's Convention of the State of South Carolina
Held in Zion Church, 1865, pp. 9-10 as cited in Holt, 1990, p. 91)

By Amy Suzanne Johnson

As the drafters of the resolution for the South Carolina black men's convention underscored, literacy and education within the African-American community have always been firmly situated between a history of struggle for equity, education, and opportunity, and a future of hopes, dreams, and promise. In a study of the meaning of literacy for elderly African Americans living in rural South Carolina, Gadsden (1992) emphasized this relationship between the past and the future by suggesting that within the African-American community literacy has been a communal investment that developed across generations, shaping the messages that individuals convey to their children about the value and importance of literacy, creating a legacy of literacy within communities.

Like Gadsden, I have been curious about the legacies of literacy that individuals living in rural communities in the South embody. To understand this phenomenon, I have interviewed African-American individuals of various ages about how they have learned and use literacy within their lives. All of the individuals I have interviewed live in a community that I call Pinesville¹ (Population 572), an African-American majority rural county (60% African American)². Like many rural communities in the Southeastern United States, Pinesville has been the stage for some of the racial dramas that comprise the history of the United States (see Housing Assistance Council, 2004). Located in the area of the United States commonly known as the "Black Belt," Pinesville has experienced persistent intergenerational

poverty linked to a history of cotton production, slavery, and sharecropping (Washington, 1901). In my inquiry into the legacy of literacy within Pinesville, I have been guided by these questions:

- How have African-American individuals living in a rural community characterized by persistent poverty provided themselves and their children with the kinds of literacy skills required by their lives?
- How do race, class, and place intersect in these individuals' lives to provide and/or deny them opportunities for practicing literacy across various contexts within the community?

In addressing these questions, I have identified how individuals' literacy learning has been framed by the community's *historical struggle for educational equity* as well as individuals' *envisioned future pathways*. In this article, I illustrate these frames and argue that they comprise the community's legacy of literacy. To do so, I use the life history of one individual, Sally Harris. I then pose implications that history and the envisioned future pose for the legacy of literacy that children within Pinesville bring with them to school.

Social and Cultural Perspectives on Literacy

Sociocultural literacy researchers have placed a concerted focus on literacy as a contextual practice (e.g., Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Gadsden, 1992; Gee, 1996; Heath, 1983)

¹ All names of people and places are pseudonyms.

² U.S. Census Bureau (2000).

that is acquired both within and outside of formal institutions like schools. Descriptions of literacy practices have shown how literacy is “interwoven in local ways of talk, sustained by talk, various in form and consequences, and sensitive to the ideological complexities of time and place” (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 338). A major thread of this work has been committed to understanding how as individuals acquire and practice literacy, they do so within nested power relationships and institutional structures that have constrained and/or facilitated individuals’ access and opportunities for literate practice. From this vantage point, literate practice can be understood as one means that individuals have used for responding to institutional, material and sociohistorical conditions.

Identifying a Legacy of Literacy

To understand how literacy is situated between historical struggle and future hopes, I conducted a life history study of 15 individuals who live and work in Pinesville. Life history is a method of inquiry committed to gaining insights into more general social issues through the particularities of an individual’s life. Cole & Knowles (2001) explained that life history “is about understanding the complexities of a person’s day-to-day decision making and the ultimate consequences that play out ... so that insights into the broader, collective experience may be achieved” (p. 11). To get at the particularities of an individual’s life, life historians collect data with a participant using an extensive, semi-structured interview, called a life history interview. Then, to understand how that life is situated within the broader context, life historians often rely on primary and secondary historical sources. In the case of Sally Harris, I interviewed her twice (January 16 and January 23, 2007) using a life history protocol to guide our conversations. This protocol focused on four domains: general life circumstances, home & family, school, and community. Our conversations were audio recorded, lasted 4 hours in total, and took place in the kindergarten classroom at Pinesville Community School, where Sally works as a paraprofessional.

To supplement interview data, I conducted historical research on Pinesville, particularly focusing on civil rights activities within the community during the 1960s. In addition to

reading historical and ethnographic studies conducted on this geographic region (e.g., Cornelius, 1991; Fox-Genovese, 1988; Schultz, 2005; Washington, 1901), I retrieved archived copies of the Pinesville Times, learning about the African-American community’s struggle for equity and civil rights. As I talked with individuals about their lives, I have come to see how this history of racial segregation and white supremacy impacted individuals’ literacy learning. It is through Sally’s life history that I illuminate this interplay between history and literacy.

My Role as Researcher

I first met Sally Harris in December 2005, when I began working with 20 teachers at Pinesville Community School (PCS), the only school in Pinesville, as part of a state-funded project focused on teaching science through literacy. After I worked on the project for two years, in January 2007 I approached Sally to interview her for this study. After her interview, I then asked Sally if I could interview her mother, Harriet, and her daughter, Lola.

Relationships are at the heart of life history research. To ensure that Sally’s life history represented the complexities of her life, I cultivated a relationship with Sally that supported the sharing of intimate life details. Because I am a European American woman from the Midwestern United States, I was positioned as a “learner” interested in the details of life in Pinesville. That I am an outsider to Pinesville has required me to draw on my own life experiences and family history to enrich data analysis. That my grandparents and family members have worked as farmers, were working class, and had limited educational backgrounds has promoted my understandings of the experiences with education and work shared during interviews. That many family members, including my mother, had to travel great distances away from home in order to pursue post-secondary schooling has enriched my insights into the lengths to which people will go for educational opportunity. That I had spent over 2 years working with individuals in Pinesville has helped me understand aspects of life in Pinesville that were reported in Sally’s interview. Yet, despite these efforts, I recognize that the data generated may have had a different texture if I had been African American, from Pinesville, and/or from the Southeastern United States.

Historical Perspectives on Literacy within Pinesville

A white supremacist ideology undergirds life in Pinesville (Schultz, 2005). While in the minority, European Americans own the land and businesses and control local government, and an African American has never held a political office. Harriet Jones, Sally Harris' mother, recollected one white Pinesville resident promising before he took his own life, "I'll die before I let the Blacks take over Pinesville." Such a statement indicates how some of Pinesville's whites feared that equal conditions between blacks and whites would lead to black domination and a minimizing of white privilege and power within the community. Although disparities exist, African Americans have not passively accepted unequal conditions.

In 1965, teachers and students at Howard School (an African American school) began demanding the integration of Pinesville's schools. Their efforts caught the attention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), who during the summer of 1965 sent civil rights workers to Pinesville to work on the related tasks of school integration, voter registration, and fair employment practices, leading to months of civil unrest, public protests, and unbearable tensions between Pinesville's black and white communities. Daily during this summer, protestors picketed the use of racial discrimination in hiring practices and demanded that blacks be able to enter Pinesville's stores through their front entrances (as opposed to their "back street" entrances). Finally, as a result of months of protesting, and years of underground efforts, Pinesville's schools were declared desegregated; but few white students attended them (a trend that continues today); and, with a white-dominated government, fewer city resources were committed to support "black" education within the county.

Sally Harris

Sally Harris was poised to enter kindergarten in the Fall of 1965, yet due to the closing of Pinesville's schools her kindergarten plans were derailed. Rather, Sally was cared for by her mother and grandmother (Maggie Jones) who together bore the responsibility for her early literacy learning and pre-school preparation.

Harriet and Maggie created a home context that was supportive of Sally's (and her siblings') early literacy learning. Although Miss Harriet had only attended school through the ninth grade, she valued education and worked to give Sally a leg up in reading, starting out first "with the basics ... letters and sounds and stuff like that." Sally also recalled Harriet repeatedly reading with her traditional school materials like Dick and Jane, remarking "I was like: 'Good Lord, I'm so tired of reading this book.'"

Sally reported that her mother and grandmother embedded learning within household tasks. For instance, as the two women prepared meals, Sally and her siblings were quizzed informally on spellings and pronunciations of different items. Within this setting, materials that the family had on hand were transformed into pedagogical materials: A shopping list prepared on the back of an old envelope became a text for how to compose an organized list and, as mentioned above, a container of Tang instant beverage became a text for learning spelling.

Sally recounted how many of the materials used to support her early literacy learning were passed on to the family by her mother's and grandmother's employers. European-American employers frequently sent home newspapers, magazines, and catalogs that the women repurposed to support Sally and her siblings literacy learning. For instance, Sally recollected how her mother used the *National Bellas Hess* catalog as a reading material, sharing the reading of the catalog with Sally and her sister:

She would tell us to sit down and look, and just pretend. If she was going to buy us something what would we want? Me and my sister would pick a dress out and then we would say now: "How much does this cost Mama?" And I remember she always reading the exact dollar amount and the cent amount, and then we'd say: "What color does it come in besides this?" She would always read the color. So mostly my mother she would get magazines like you could order dresses out of and stuff like that.

When it came time in 1966 for Sally to attend first grade at the "integrated" Pinesville School, she reported that Harriet and Maggie were

persistent in relating to Sally the importance of education. Sally recalled that initially she was reluctant to attend school, preferring instead to stay at home and perform domestic duties with Harriet and Maggie. Yet, Maggie insisted that Sally attend school: “School is something that I must and need to have because without an education I won’t get anywhere. My grandmother would always tell me that I want you to finish school.”

Sally recalled that Maggie held high expectations for her behavior at school, frequently threatening: “you better be up there learning”; and, “I’d better not have not [sic] one of them teachers call me and tell me something you done did or you done said, because when you get home you going to have to deal with me.” As a result of this consistent and persistent at-home support, Sally felt ready to complete the kinds of literacy tasks she encountered in school.

Similar to the teachers that Walker (1996) has described, Sally emphasized that her teachers had high expectations for her learning of specific literacy skills. Sally’s teachers were African American and were from the community. She described her teachers as always insisting that she “do better ... [and] go further.” Sally had fond memories of her third grade teacher, Ms. Millie B. Hayes who taught her spelling and proclaimed that Sally was one of the top spellers in the class.

As Sally approached high school, like many of her classmates, she entertained the idea of dropping out in order to get a job to better support the family. Her 9th grade class was comprised of 30 students. When Sally graduated in 1979 only 13 classmates remained. Without the support of Maggie and Harriet, who assured her that they would support her through high school, Sally might not have earned her high school diploma, becoming the first person in her family to graduate high school.

In high school, as in elementary school, Sally had African American teachers from Pinesville who emphasized her acquisition of literacy skills, like typing, that would benefit her in the future. As such these teachers had experienced the struggle for civil rights and educational equity within the community, which gave them insights into the kinds of opportunities their students had and would

have access to upon completion of school. She described her favorite high school teacher, Mr. Marcus Clevlen’s who taught her typing class, memorable and artful teaching style:

He would be upfront and ... he would have his back turned. He would call out the letter and we would have to type it and you know he said it’s supposed to sound like harmony together. He knew every person that wasn’t together. He was a genius... He said, “It’s supposed to be like music to your ears.”

In the years following her graduation, Sally worked as a housekeeper for the same families as her mother and grandmother. In 1986, after having given birth to her only daughter, Lola, Sally began attending a two-year vocational program at Park City Technical College, located one hour north of Pinesville. In 1988, Sally earned her associate’s degree in Early Childhood Education. Sally explained that she was hesitant to attend her graduation ceremony. She believed it was too far to drive only to walk across a stage and receive a piece of paper. Upon the urging of a classmate, however, Sally changed her mind and rented a graduation cap and gown so that she could attend the ceremony. Attending graduation was worth it when she looked out in the crowd to see “a woman, her name was Ms. Violet Farmer. She was the only person from Pinesville... She smiled and waved at me and I felt better.”

Upon graduation, Sally was immediately hired by her former high school teacher, Mr. Clevlen (now principal), as a paraprofessional in the kindergarten classroom at Pinesville School (now a K-8 school). In 2000, a charter was granted to establish Pinesville Community School. The old school was closed and Sally transferred to the new location, on the edge of Pinesville. For many of her young students, she taught their parents and/or attended school with their grandparents. Currently, Sally teaches her kindergarten students to read, using direct instruction skills-focused curriculum. Sally explained that she sees this curriculum as being so important to her young children:

See they getting ready to take a test and they’ll be bubbling in... We got to get them ready. We have to because if not, they’re going to be so

far behind. We feel sometimes like just because we live in this county, it's small, the kids at other schools are so much smarter than us...

Sally takes seriously her responsibility of teaching her students to read so that they can pass the test. When a parent suggests to Sally that his/her child is not ready or able to read, Sally insists: "Let me tell you something, when your child leaves out of here, they are going to be reading."

Sally's position as a paraprofessional has positioned her as a leader within the school and community at large. Sally has been called on by the minister at Kindness Baptist Church to teach Sunday school and to organize and emcee the annual Women's Day and Youth Day celebrations. She is one of two faculty moderators for the school's chapter of Future Farmers of America. Sally regularly attends PTA and school board meetings, during which she expresses her opinions about curriculum, instruction, and other school policies.

Discussion

As a lens for interpreting Sally's educational experiences the *historical struggle for equitable education* by African Americans helps us see the interplay between Pinesville's history and Sally's education and literacy learning. For, it was within a climate in which African Americans were cast as physically and mentally inferior and denied access to equitable education that Sally Harris emerged into literacy, using materials like catalogs, magazines, and other household items that were acquired within the complex racial and power relationships of that time period. Sally's education is also situated within her specific family's history, of which she was the first to earn her high school diploma. At the most basic, the African-American community's struggle for educational opportunity mandated that Sally excel in school in order to participate in a future that was more equitable and just.

Future pathways for African-Americans in Pinesville provides another vantage point from which to interpret Sally's mandate for literacy. At the crux of Maggie's insistence on Sally's schooling was a belief that education and literacy would open up for Sally new pathways for work. With education, Maggie believed that Sally would be well positioned for a high-wage

job and would not have to work the kinds of low-wage jobs without health insurance that she had to work. In this way, Sally would not have to be so reliant on European Americans for her economic well being. As a result of her education and literacy, Sally became the first person in her family to earn a college degree, to have a job that provided her with full health insurance, and to be a homeowner.

This perspective also offers insight into the skills-focused instruction that Sally recalled having experienced throughout her schooling and that Sally participates in today. Sally's understanding of literacy as a viable skill, imperative for one's *future pathways* shapes her perspective for teaching literacy in kindergarten. For Sally as a teacher, making sure her young kindergarten students know how to read is imperative for their future success in school and life. Sally understands how her students are perceived by others because they are from Pinesville. Sally indicates that the smallness of her county and its history of oppression have left the impression that the children in Pinesville are not as smart as the children in surrounding counties

The community's *historical struggle for education* and an understanding of the *future pathways* for African Americans in Pinesville comprise the legacy of literacy that Sally carries with her as a student and a teacher. Sally's mother, grandmother, and teachers' ideas about what it meant to be literate were set within the historical narrative of Pinesville. Their actions as supporters of Sally's literacy learning came out of their experience within Pinesville, as do Sally's present actions as a kindergarten paraprofessional.

Conclusion

Gadsden (1992) argued an intergenerational and community investment or legacy of literacy is a resource that African-American children bring with them to schools:

Children enter schools with a legacy of meaning about literacy and educational achievement that is not easily transformed. The view and interpretations of literacy that children hold are supported and urged by generations of belief that literacy should be liberating,

that instruction should and can be thoughtful and respectful, that schools are places where learning is expected to occur, and that teachers are trusted holders of children's futures as literate adults (p. 335).

As teachers of literacy in the Southeastern United States, we have to recognize the complex history of this region as shaping a particular legacy of literacy. Our students in South Carolina embody this legacy and carry it with them as a resource for their learning. While this history may represent a bygone era that we collectively believe we have surpassed; the

history of small communities like Pinesville are rich with literacy practice and attainment. As in the case of Sally Harris, the views of literacy that children in small rural communities in the South hold are supported by generations of belief that literacy should be liberating, should offer a more equitable future, and should open up future opportunities. Literacy instruction should respond to and engage with these legacies of literacy. As teachers, we can create instruction that is uplifting and respectful of all learners. For, as Gadsden (1992) reminded us, we "are the trusted holders of children's futures as literate adults."

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“Not” No More: Content Teachers Making Sense of Adolescent Readers

*I always thought it was **not** my job to teach reading,
and if a student came to me without the ability to read,
then it was **not** my fault and **not** my concern
and certainly **not** my duty to change.*

.....
*It is indeed my job to teach reading.
It is all our jobs.*

(Mark, Social Studies Teacher, Spring, 2007)

*By Mary E. Styslinger, Deidre M. Clary,
Victoria A. Oglan with Dee Culbreth, Kelly Gerth,
Erin Green, Mark T. McAbee, Libby Newman,
Riley Thomas, Nicole Tune*

We have all read the scary statistics. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2002) revealed that secondary school students are reading below expected levels. The Alliance for Excellent Education (AEE) made public that one in four secondary students is unable to read and comprehend textbook material. A flurry of reports and research studies have been published lately which address the “adolescent literacy crisis” (Kamil, 2003; National Commission on Writing, 2004; Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; NCTE, 2006). Even a recent publication of *Reading Today* (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2007) nominated adolescent literacy as the “hottest topic” in a survey conducted by the International Reading Organization (IRA). While we have certainly become more informed about the current status, or lack thereof, of adolescent literacy, we need to better understand those factors which have led us here.

High school teachers are mostly content-driven. English teachers believe their job is to teach literature and composition, whereas other content area teachers teach math, science, and social studies. The focus of most secondary classrooms is on the *what*, with little attention paid to the *how*, that is, those strategies for helping students better understand the content (Holloway, 1999). While a number of teachers may ask questions of students, testing their comprehension of *what* they have read, there is little instruction in *how* students should have gone about reading and understanding the materials provided them before the test

(Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Hampston, & Echevarria, 1998).

While the National Reading Panel (2000) highlights the necessity for high quality teachers to ensure students’ success in learning to read and identifies pedagogical domains essential for expanding teachers’ knowledge base about reading (i.e. sophisticated understanding of how students learn to read; knowledge of the difficulties experienced by some students and how to provide necessary support; and the ability to effectively implement a variety of multi-level instructional practices), the Panel’s conclusions seem to support documentation that secondary teachers lack confidence in making informed and effective curricular and instructional decisions about reading to facilitate the development of their students’ needs as readers (Phillips, 2002). The situation is exacerbated by the fact that “the majority of secondary schools today do not provide either systematic literacy instruction in content areas classrooms or extra support for struggling readers” (Sturtevant, 2003, p. 5).

Historically, direct literacy instruction has been sustained until the third grade. However, there is a glaring need to maintain literacy instruction across the middle and secondary levels so that students can read narrative text and also learn specific strategies to derive meaning from expository and informational text. It is well known that when literacy instruction is withdrawn prematurely, middle and high school students struggle to read increasingly difficult

text and to comprehend more abstract ideas. Similarly, if students - two to three grade levels behind their peers - do not receive intensive literacy instruction, their academic achievement will suffer since a struggling reader will not experience success across the content areas. Therefore, it is even more critical that secondary content area teachers better understand and teach specific literacy strategies to help students read and make meaning from the written material used to teach course content. Conclusions from the RAND Reading Study Group (2002) document the need for continued literacy instruction at the middle and high school levels.

What seems to be a simple solution—facilitate and support content area teachers in the teaching of reading—is not so simple after all. In the past, teachers have been resistant to reading instruction in high schools (Artley, 1944). Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko and Hurwitz (1999) more recently noted how teachers circumvented the need for students to read texts through adjustments to assignments or alternate methods of content presentation. Some teachers have defended the demands of the curriculum across the disciplines as a barrier to implementing content area reading instruction (Kingery, 2000; O'Brien, Moje and Stewart, 2001) and, in some cases, resented the work of the school reading specialist (Darwin, 2002).

We must openly acknowledge the culture of secondary schools. As high school teachers ourselves for a combined total of 125 years, we can appreciate the complexities and nuances of teaching at this level. The presence of professional communities among teachers has been least prominent in secondary schools (Louis & Marks, 1996). This absence often prevents teachers from experimenting with new approaches and innovations in a non-threatening, supportive environment (Bryk and Schneider, 2004). Second, the segmentation of the curriculum and high school organization works against the culture of collaboration (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1996). How well do we really know our teacher-neighbors? Yet we know that when teachers collaborate in interdisciplinary teams, they are more likely to form strong professional relations and try new approaches that yield success (NCTE, 2006).

Designing Professional Development

We wanted something different for the math, science, social studies, and English teachers that we work with. We wanted to design and provide a structure for professional development in literacy across the content areas that would promote time for learning, encourage commitment from faculty, allow for knowledge sharing, promote inquiry into practice, and connect to student performance.

Effective professional development over an extended period of time has the capacity to shift an individual from little or no knowledge to that of the expert (Cooter, 2004). In contrast, much professional development has been directed at the level of first exposure and is typically delivered as a single workshop or presentation on a particular instructional strategy (Robb, 2000; Cooter, 2004). The alternative capacity-building model (Cooter, 2004), involves extended engagement with new ideas and strategies over time.

Along with time, we wanted to provide teachers with an experience that encouraged investment and commitment within faculty, knowing that staff development is sustained only if teachers are involved in the planning of the staff development initiative (Gusky & Huberman, 1995). This includes administrators working together with faculty at the stages of planning and implementation. This is in contrast to hiring the “outsider” who lacks intimate knowledge of school culture and the needs of teachers and students.

Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) argue that traditional models of in-service or dissemination need to be replaced by opportunities for “knowledge sharing” based on real situations. Teachers need opportunities to share what they know, discuss what they want to learn, and connect new concepts and strategies to their own unique contexts (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). School culture is responsive to critical inquiry and possibilities for dialogue (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1996; Louis & Marks, 1996). More specifically, Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) suggest that giving teachers a role of researcher can generate professional growth, arguing that teacher reflection has the ability to generate increases in student achievement, so critical to the national agenda.

A thin but growing body of research indicates a relationship between student development and achievement and models of professional development that have the capacity to improve student performance. Such research is critical in light of the perceived need to improve adolescent literacy. It is agreed that the quality of the teacher influences student achievement (Costa & Garmston, 1994). In addition, professional development is likely to have the greatest impact on student performance when it is linked to classroom practice or content (Garet et al., 2001, Kelleher, 2003). “Investment in professional development pays large dividends in student achievement” (NCTE, 2006).

Professional development that is systematic, sustained, and connected to student performance has been documented in the last five years. Estrada (2005) argued that professional development over an extended period of time improved student achievement. Estrada found that when “all stakeholders, including teachers, researchers, and professional developers (were) willing to face the facts of student performance levels, take responsibility, and take the risks inherent in working toward improvement” (2005, p. 355), student performance levels increased. Similarly, Langer (2000) uncovered the connection between improved student achievement and teacher participation in extended professional development: “The teachers in schools that are beating the odds are in touch with their students, their profession, their colleagues, and society at large . . . The knowledge and experiences gained in their wide professional arena affect the classroom context, their students’ learning and achievement” (p. 434).

With all of this in mind, we designed Project RAISSE: Reading Assistance Initiative for Secondary School Educators, funded by the Arthur Vining Davis Foundation and housed at the southern university where we teach. The mission of Project RAISSE is to enhance reading achievement and reading instruction in high schools. The approach is to design and offer professional development for teachers that will help them understand the reading process specific to content area reading, develop the knowledge base needed to make informed and effective curricular and instructional decisions about reading, and thereby positively affect

student reading proficiency and achievement. The targeted audience is teachers in two high schools that are situated in a rural school district in our state.

Project RAISSE spans across two years, affects directly 48 teachers, with total costs of \$150,000. The Project’s activities include Literacy Graduate Study, Collegial Study Groups, and a Teachers as Professional Leaders Program. Literacy Graduate Study includes 6-hours of literacy graduate study taught on school site during Year One for 7 selected content area classroom teacher-leaders. The curriculum, engagements, and projects are negotiated with teacher-participants. Collegial Study Groups are established during Year Two as those 7 selected teachers lead school-based, content area study groups, sharing their literacy learning with colleagues. Teacher-participants in these study groups receive graduate credit for their participation in a literacy study groups. The Teachers as Professional Leaders Program includes ongoing professional development opportunities (e.g. literacy conferences, best practice seminars, school-wide literacy inservice) for teachers to enhance and share their learning with colleagues at the local, state, and national levels and in a variety of professional venues. In addition to the activities outlined above, the Project is guided by an educational research agenda and corresponding program evaluation plan.

Engaging in Inquiry

In accordance with our belief that professional development provide for knowledge sharing, promote teacher inquiry, and consider student performance, we engaged in a collaborative research project with the core group of content area teachers involved with Project RAISSE. We wanted to simultaneously broaden our own understanding of literacy, while at the same time, better understand those readers making their way into our classrooms each day. The following three questions guided our investigation:

- What characteristics are evident in the literacy lives of selected struggling adolescent readers?
- What characteristics are reflected across the literacy lives of selected struggling adolescent readers?

- What might teachers consider as they plan for content area instruction with struggling adolescent readers?

During the first year of Project RAISSE, each of seven teachers selected two readers who appeared to be struggling in his or her content area classroom upon whom to focus. We then engaged in an authentic inquiry into the literacy life of each student. Data was collected across the semester-long course and included surveys, interviews, test scores, observational notes, classroom artifacts, and the admission of both a miscue and retrospective miscue analysis. We attempted to capture detail from the perspective of students by using multiple sources of data. We were non-interventionist and empathetic as we tried to understand how students perceived and experienced reading. Three representative stories follow. In each case, we tried to tell the tale of an adolescent reader while considering the implications these stories have for our own teaching lives.

Meet Jack

Jack is 17-years old, white, male, and likable. Even though he is not “popular,” he has a large group of friends and seems to be enjoying his time in high school. Jack is heavily involved in JROTC. He loves to listen to music and often tries to persuade his teacher to let him listen to his MP3 Player while doing his work. He plays video games, especially those based on war. He is polite, respectful, and follows directions to the best of his ability. He takes notes most of the time, but not always. He appears to listen in class but refuses to go to the board to work a problem or speak in front of classmates. He often has to be coaxed into finishing assignments with any level of difficulty.

Jack is consistently a D student. He has failed one class, German, and his highest final grade has been an 84 in Multimedia. In the Fall of 2005, Jack took the PLAN and his scores ranged from 12 to 17; his lowest score was in English. In Spring 2006, he took the HSAP and scored Basic level in English and failed the Mathematics section with a score of 197. In Fall 2006, he retried the Mathematics sections of the HSAP and failed again with a score of 187. He failed the Algebra I, Part 2 End of Course Examination with a 64, but passed the English I End of Course Examination with a 73.

When interviewed about reading, Jack admits that he will read what he is interested in. He does recognize value in reading and claims that people read to “increase their knowledge” and “get information.” He also mentions that folks might read for “entertainment.” He knows that a good reader “loves to read” and “practices.” He will read at home and admits to reading a wide variety of genre including comic books, game guides, star wars books, and video game manuals. He can “get into the book real - real easy, after the first few pages. I have a really big imagination. I mean, I can like actually picture myself inside the book which is a . . . I guess is pretty cool.” He accepts that he “can’t see the world without reading. I mean that would be just weird. I wouldn’t be able to see a world without reading.”

Yet Jack has only read two books in the past ten months. While he mentions that he learned to read in school, he does not read there anymore. He does not read in his English class, admitting, “it’s been a long time since I read anything in this class.” He has no favorite authors and has never re-read a book. He defines reading as “sounding it out” and claims he is a good reader because he knows how to “say some words.” He explains, “when there’s a word I don’t know, I’ll try to sound it out, but if it doesn’t sound right to me, I will go ask somebody. I’ll ask my teacher or my mom, if she’s around. . . . I keep a mental note of how to pronounce it. Like whenever I hear the word, when I see it again, I will actually know what it is, and how to say it.” He equates improvement in reading with reading “faster.”

Jack claims to use visualization and prediction strategies as he reads, and an initial review of Jack’s miscues reveals that he is a moderately, if not even a highly, effective reader. However, after he finished reading, Jack was asked to retell the story. His response was that he could not. During the retrospective miscue analysis, Jack read the passage again silently, and then was asked what it was about. He was able to retell the story after reading the passage a second time.

Meet Dan

Dan is a polite, 16-year-old, white, male student. He has a middle class background, and his parents are supportive. He is not involved in any extracurricular activities because he works

at a poultry farm and “doesn’t have time for sports.” While his interests seem to run toward the same types of activities as other boys his age—music and video games—he is far from “popular.” Dan keeps a very low profile and does not stand up for himself. For example, last year two of his classmates started calling him “Susan” for no apparent reason. The name stuck.

Dan does not recognize himself as a good student. When asked what makes him a good student, he replied, “I – I don’t know.” Dan has to be coaxed into taking notes and finishing assignments. It is also very rare that Dan will ask for help of his own volition. He has earned 5 of the 8 credits that he attempted last year. Two of these credits, English I and Algebra I, Pt I, were earned after attending a summer school course to recover the credits. During the first semester of this year, he failed Algebra 1, Pt 2, and is re-taking it this semester. He is currently taking English 2. When his current English teacher was asked about Dan’s reading and writing, the teacher stated, “he doesn’t read.”

Dan’s standardized test scores support the fact that he has difficulty in the area of reading. His scores on the Measures of Academic Progress Test range from the 7th percentile in Fall 2003, to the 32nd percentile in Spring 2005, to the 10th percentile in Spring 2006. On the Explore Test in 2004, his lowest score was a 6 in English and his highest score was a 13 in Reading. However, on the PLAN in 2006, his lowest score was 10 in Reading. Finally, on the PACT in 2005 he scored Below Basic in all areas.

Dan cannot tell us what he has read lately, but he does estimate that he has read about five books in the past year; he owns twelve. The only titles he mentions are from the textbook in English class. He seems to endure reading. When reading, he “goes straight through,” and reads “so I won’t have to go back over it again.” He likes horror, action, and comic books. He chooses books by the back cover. He thinks he is a good reader because he can “recognize words.” He associates reading with memorizing: “I try to memorize it . . . so I can do good on my test.” He does not appreciate excess language in texts and wishes authors would “try to get down to the point about stuff, instead of showing all those examples. No

need talking about everything else.”

Dan is unfamiliar with his own processes as a reader. He cannot explain what to do to be a better reader. He thinks his mom is a good reader but doesn’t know why. When he does not know a word, he will “sound it out” or “look in the dictionary.” He may ask the teacher or try to slow down. He does not take notes as he reads or mark the text in any way. He does not use reference materials, tables, figures, or pictures in the text to aid his comprehension. He does not discuss what he reads with others. He does, however, recognize the value of reading and knows that he needs to read “to get info, learn.” He tries to focus, visualize, and predict as he reads.

When Dan read a short passage for his miscue analysis, he had 16 miscues. Three of these miscues were coded as semantically acceptable. The remaining 75% of his miscues were semantically unacceptable. Three were non-words such as “hidden” instead of “hidden,” “precously” instead of “precisely,” and “tairy” instead “tarry.” The majority of his miscues were replacements of the word in the text with words that were graphonemically and syntactically similar. For example, he replaced “intensified” with “insensitive,” “seam” with “steam,” “leaned” with “learned,” “fascinated” with “fantasized,” and “executed” with “excluded.”

When Dan and his teacher sat down to discuss his reading in general and his miscues, he said that the passage made “a little” sense. He recognized that his replacements for words in the text changed the meaning of the sentence and, in fact, most of the time, his replacements made no sense. Also, when revisiting the text, Dan could recognize some of the words that he did not know during his first reading. He stated that he felt he made the majority of his miscues reading because he was reading too fast and that slowing down would prevent them.

Meet Rachael

Racheal is a 15-year-old, bubbly, white teenager who usually has a smile on her face. She is reliable and helps out in the classroom when needed. She can often be found with her nose in a book. She enjoys reading but does not like to answer questions about a book. Rachael struggles in most of her academic

classes, but she admits that she learned to love reading this past year.

Racheal struggles on standardized tests and performed Below Basic on her 8th grade PACT test. She did score relatively high on her MAP test, indicating she would be able to pass the HSAP exit exam next year. When she re-took the MAP test this spring her score rose ten points which is about 2 ½ times the normal expected increase.

When interviewed about reading, Racheal says she chooses books that have been recommended and she will read any time and any place. She admits she loves to read because it allows her to escape from reality and go to different places. Racheal revealed that she did not like reading until this year. She attributes her change in her attitude about reading to teachers who “sit down and explain to me how to figure out the words, the big words and stuff.” Racheal reports she “loves to read at home every night” and she self-selects “love stories, friends stories, action stories and almost anything.” She also says she will re-read “sometimes, if I like it.” Racheal thinks people read “so they can speak.” Because Racheal has trouble with both spelling and pronouncing words, she feels she is not a good reader.

Racheal has read many books this year, and she is coming to know more about young adult novels. She enjoys reading in school, although she would like to get “more books in the classroom.” Racheal is proud of the fact that this year she is finally “getting it” when it comes to reading.

In terms of the strategies she uses to support her reading, Racheal says she occasionally takes notes when reading and she always reads aloud when the text becomes difficult. She also admits she “reads slowly for understanding” and occasionally she will discuss what she is reading with others. She also reports that she usually visualizes and makes predictions to help her remember text and she always rereads and asks questions of the text. Racheal also always tries to get back on track when she loses concentration. The strategies she knows to support her are “sounding it out” and “ask an adult.”

Even though Racheal struggles with comprehension at times, she did report during the retrospective miscue analysis that she

“predicts much more when she reads now and she has learned to try to picture things as she reads.” Racheal made many miscues, but she is proud of her accomplishments this year with reading and her change in attitude about reading is testimony to this. “Oh yes last year I hated reading. I wouldn’t pick up a book, but this year I’ve read a lot of books from the library.”

Discovering Adolescent Readers

As individual teachers, each of us learned a great deal from engaging in this inquiry into the literacy experiences of our selected students. We discovered much to improve our own classroom interaction and transaction with them. But as a collaborative group, we realized even more. When we were able to engage in collective knowledge sharing across these reading stories, we were able to recognize characteristics that reflected across our struggling adolescent readers. While we discussed fourteen readers among us, we shared excerpts from the lives of a representative three students in the hopes that our knowledge sharing will prompt further consideration and conversation around the “adolescent literacy crises.”

As we considered the reading lives of these two young men and one woman, we determined that Jack, Dan, and Rachel all equate reading with “saying,” “sounding,” and “pronouncing.” Jack defines reading as “sounding it out,” as does Dan. Even Racheal explains that people read “so they can speak,” asserting she is not a good reader since she has difficulty “pronouncing” words. Reading is equated with sounds, pieces, and parts. Jack believes he is a good reader simply because he knows how to “say some words.” When he comes to an unfamiliar word, he will try to “sound it out,” keeping a mental note of how to “pronounce it.” He is like Dan who is also a good reader because he can “recognize words.” Never do Jack, Dan, or Racheal mention the importance of understanding what a word might mean. All are bound by the ties of once experienced phonetic definitions of reading.

As teachers we were most disheartened by this literacy discovery, but then more honestly began to question whether or not we had done

anything purposeful (before this year) in our content area classrooms to refute, dispute, or extend this limited understanding of reading. We had not. We had not ever defined reading with our students. Instead, we had just presumed that the adolescents coming into our classrooms understood reading as a meaning-making activity. Once we became aware of our students' more limited definitions of reading, we began to realize the importance of becoming strategic readers and teachers.

We need to help Jack and others understand the difference in calling and understanding words. We need to empower our students with the tools necessary to increase comprehension of complex text. Both Dan and Jack appear passive and dependent readers whose most oft used strategy is to "ask someone," with the goal of learning how to "say" it. Dan does not utilize any fix-it strategies when he does not understand what he is reading; he merely races to the finish line. He needs to learn to pause when reading in order to assess whether or not he is making meaning. While Jack knows that a good reader "practices," he cannot explain what a reader specifically does to become more proficient. He claims to visualize and predict, but he cannot re-tell a story after reading it the first time. Dan is also unfamiliar with the processes of a reader, thinking his mom is a good reader but unable to explain why. He is so very unlike Rachael, in the course of becoming strategic, as she takes notes, reads aloud, and re-reads.

We want to support content reading with strategic teaching. Neither Jack nor Dan possesses strategies to make meaning of words on the page as is evidenced by their re-telling during the retrospective miscue analysis. Jack could not recall what happened in his story. Dan cannot remember the title of any text read lately. As teachers we could increase the comprehension of all students simply by teaching reading-as-process in lieu of reading-as-product. We want to help students mark text, stop and think, make a prediction, ask a question, write about what they have read, visualize, retell, reread, adjust reading rate, make connections, and infer (Tovani, 2000). We want to be one of those teachers who has inspired Rachael by sitting down alongside her and helping to "explain" the process.

In an effort to help Dan and others like him become more familiar with reading processes, we can model our own strategies when making sense of difficult text. On an overhead we can share our own metacognition as we attempt to make sense of word problems, complex graphs, text boxes, challenging vocabulary, or Elizabethan English with students. Teacher think-alouds and demonstrations might help de-mystify the reading process for students like Rachael and help her, Jack, and Dan recognize that we are all readers learning about reading, all the time, in each of our classes. Talking about these strategies with students might benefit Rachael and others so that we might gain a greater sense of the processes that all readers undergo to make meaning and sense of text.

We can recognize the need for teaching strategies specific to reading textbooks as we follow Dan's struggles. He may be getting lost in the excess language and structures of these complex texts as he wishes authors would "get down to the point about stuff." We need to remember to help students analyze text features (Daniels and Zemelman, 2004) such as types of text, sidebars, pull boxes, typography, color, symbols, icons, images, graphics, organization, headers, and footers.

Similar to the comparison between reading and saying is the comparison of reading to memorizing, evidenced by Dan who freely admits, "I try to memorize it . . . so I can do good on my test." This has led us to question those assessments in high school content area classrooms which may emphasize rote and recall, allowing and even encouraging students to simply regurgitate and repeat information gleaned from texts (in lieu of interpreting and making meaning), thus leading students to make this association between reading and memorizing. While we want students leaving our classrooms with an increased knowledge of our respective content areas, we also want them to walk down the hallways, questioning, extending, inferring, and transferring ideas instead of simply repeating them.

Rather than reading for meaning, both Jack and Dan read for speed. In lieu of comprehension as a goal in reading text, Jack and Dan sprint through words, sentences, paragraphs, and pages, failing to make sense

along the way. Along with helping our students read strategically, we want to help them read slowly and carefully. Dan realizes he needs to slow down. Conducting this inquiry has led us to consider the amount of reading assigned students. More aware of the jobs students hold at poultry farms or the places students hold on sports teams, we want to encourage students to read for understanding and not equate reading with quantity.

Unexpectedly, both Jack and Rachael reveal that they have had pleasurable experiences when reading. Jack relays an almost transcendent, certainly aesthetic, experience: “I have a really big imagination. I mean, I can like actually picture myself inside the book. . . I wouldn’t be able to see a world without reading.” And Rachael shares her recent discovery of and enthusiasm for young adult novels, admitting she “loves to read at home every night.” Rachael especially demonstrates the powerful role that attitude can play in literacy development, reading ability, and overall academic performance. Once she began to enjoy reading, she subsequently began reading more “love stories, friends stories, action stories, and almost anything.” An increase in test scores (2 ½ times the normal expected increase) followed.

Unfortunately, none of these three students described any such pleasurable experiences with texts provided at school. Dan merely endures reading, going “straight through.” However, he has no opportunity to engage in the kind of reading that might pique his interest. This has led us to question, how can we better support and validate this “other” reading that students might respond to and allow students like Dan to read books filled with horror and action or comic books, for that matter? Can we content area teachers allow the time, space, and choice to read in our classes? Are our

textbook driven courses contributing to the “adolescent literacy crisis” and resulting in a generation of non-readers?

As schools around the state, led by literacy coaches funded by the statewide reading initiative, convincingly argue for silent sustained reading, it would behoove us to consider how we can interweave more engaging and approachable texts into our math, science, social studies, and English classrooms. With Jack’s words in mind, “It’s been a long time since I read anything in this class,” we must seek out those picture books, young adult novels, graphic novels, and magazines related to our content areas and interweave these into our curriculum during read-alouds and independent reading in the hopes we might better engage students as readers and thinkers. Given the chance or choice, we should say, it seems that both Jack and Dan would enjoy reading comic books or science fiction and Rachael more young adult novels in the classroom.

Over time and with commitment, we have engaged in an inquiry around and alongside struggling adolescent readers. We have come together as teachers to share what we have learned in an effort to promote dialogue around adolescent literacy. Quite simply, we have discovered that our struggling readers, herein represented as Jack, Dan, and Rachael, are bound by phonetic definitions of reading and are in need of teachers who will help them redefine reading as a meaning-making process that takes time. Our students are wanting for strategies to facilitate their comprehension, teachers who will teach and model these strategies, and materials and resources (including tests and genres) that provide for meaning-making opportunities. Whereas we might have once been content driven teachers, **not no more.**

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Fighting the Big Mac Mentality: Attendance Policies and Performance in an Active Learning Environment

*I do not see why it matters how many days I miss.
Just that I am doing the work and turning it in on time.
To judge me on my attendance and not performance is crazy.*

By Nancy Lawson Remler

I shouldn't be surprised by this freshman composition student's complaint. It is common. Still, the attitude inherent in it is enough to drive me crazy.

In my seventeen years of teaching college composition, I've struggled with such perceptions of class attendance, that taking a college course is tantamount to doing the assignments. All the discussion, workshopping, and conferencing that go on during the class period is extra, insignificant, unnecessary. I explain to my students that ultimately they earn credit for taking a course, not simply doing the assignments. They nod at me, indicate that they understand, but I doubt they believe me.

I even hear the same commentary at home from my husband, who replies to my gripes about absenteeism with, "If they can skip class and still make an A, why do you care?"

I care for a number of reasons, the first being that I haven't yet met a student who can skip class regularly and still make an A. I also care because whether the students value the course content or not, they'll have to be good writers to succeed in their other courses and in the professional world. I care because considering all the time and effort I put into planning lessons, chronic absenteeism affects my morale. As Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb (2001) put it, "Some of us take absences personally. After all, being stood up for an unexpected meeting usually is demeaning" (p. 124). Finally, I care because I am a teacher. It's my job to care whether my students learn.

In spite of my concerns for attendance and learning, in recent semesters I have heeded my husband's and students' comments and experimented with abandoning my attendance policies, stating on my syllabi that I recognize the students are adults and their attendance

decisions are their business, but that as responsible adults they should come to class prepared and turn in work on time. During these experimental semesters a number of students failed to turn in work, asked to turn in work late, asked for extra credit opportunities or dropped the course altogether—behaviors, I thought, that they could have avoided if they had come to class in the first place. In fact, my anecdotal evidence matched Petress's (1996): "Not all students are mature; student behavior and academic failures indicate that for the most part, the very students who get themselves in trouble due to excessive absences are the very ones who vociferously object to attendance policies" (p. 387).

During that semester, I arrived in class one day prepared for a peer review session only to discover an empty room. I then decided to examine attendance policies more closely. Research turned up varied results. Some accounts, such as Thompson's (2002) and Vidler's (1980) reveal relationships between strong attendance and strong grades, although both studies concur that strong grades are not necessarily the result of regular attendance. These studies, however, examined students' attendance with respect to their performance on tests. I, on the other hand, am a writing teacher. I help students improve a skill, and I've always taught them, as most composition theories contend, that refining their writing skill comes with practice. If students don't participate in the discussion, pre-writing, research practice, peer-review and mechanics workshops conducted during class sessions, their writing stands little chance of improvement. In spite of Gump's (2004) study concluding that "weekly quizzes decreased absences. . .but did not increase grades," I set out to discover if regular

attendance affected writing performance (p. 25). Was attendance in the writing classroom as crucial as I believed it to be? To answer my question, I examined student attendance in two sections of ENGL 1102, Composition and Literature, the second course in my university's freshman composition sequence.

When writing the syllabus for Fall, 2007, I did not forego an attendance policy, as I did during my previous experiment. Not only had previous semesters discouraged me, but attendance on some days was so sparse as to impede class activities. I learned from Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb (2001) that students in natural science courses were "more responsive when pushed to attend by an attendance-checking policy" (p. 129). Therefore, I took the advice of a colleague and attached the attendance policy to students' grades.

The attendance policy for each class varied. In section 8 of ENGL 1102, the attendance policy read as follows:

Because of the workshop model in this class, your attendance will affect your performance and your learning. At the same time, you are an adult, so you should make your own decisions about your attendance. For financial aid purposes, I will keep attendance for the registrar's office. If you are absent more than a week consecutively without contacting me, I will assume you do not plan to return to class, and I will withdraw you for non-attendance. Otherwise, your attendance is your own business. As an adult, you are responsible for your own learning. Therefore, if you are absent, I expect you to contact me or another student, or you should consult the course website, to find out how you should be prepared for the following class.

However, in section 13 of the same course, the attendance policy read as follows:

Because of the workshop model in this class, your attendance will affect your performance and your learning. Therefore, attendance in class is connected to your grade on the following scale:

- Students absent 1-4 times during the semester will receive no

automatic grade penalty.

- Students absent 5-6 times will be penalized a letter grade from their course grade.
- Students absent 7 times will be penalized two letter grades from the course grade.
- Students absent more than seven times will earn the grade of F.

In this class there's no such thing as an excused or unexcused absence. If you're not here, you're not here, no matter the reason. If you are absent, I expect you to contact me or another student, or you should consult the course website, to find out how you should be prepared for the following class.

In both classes, attendance affected grades, for when students missed class, they often missed classwork assignments, which they could not make up. However, in only one class did I attach a grade penalty to an excessive number of absences.

Along with specific attendance policies, I also included on the syllabus my usual note about my instructional style:

I believe students learn best in an active learning environment. Students learn to write by writing. They learn to read and interpret literature by reading and interpreting literature. I will conduct few lectures in class. Instead, you will do much group work, individual writing, and collaborating during research and literary discussions.

Each semester my composition courses employ active learning strategies, which Bonwell and Eison (1991) describe as "anything that involves students in doing things and thinking about things they are doing" (p. 2). On a regular basis, I make sure my classes demonstrate Bonwell and Eison's (1991) criteria for active learning: an emphasis on engaging students in activities that facilitate higher order thinking (p. 2). I often employ Bean's (2001) various strategies for "presenting students with disciplinary problems that stimulate critical thinking" and "making students responsible for formulating their solutions in language, either spoken or written" (p. 169).

Reviewing the literature on student attendance affirmed my beliefs in active learning

strategies. After all, “another pedagogical practice that encourages attendance seems to be engaging students in activities they must be in class to do: participating in discussion, asking questions, and working on assignments and projects” (Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb, 2001, p.132). Until this semester, however, I had not directly connected active learning strategies to grades. Cross and Fray (1993) had cautioned me: “If grades are to indicate levels of achievement only, it seems inappropriate to count class participation, unless class participation is an integral part of the course.” I felt that participation was certainly integral to a writing course, and with active learning instructional strategies which frequently (at least weekly) culminated in classwork grades, I set out to “engage students, emphasize the importance of students’ contributions and have content directly related to the knowledge assessed” (St. Clair, 1999, p.179).

At the beginning of the term, I was curious to know my students’ opinions about attendance policies. So during a classroom writing assignment, I asked students to share their thoughts about the topic. Some students, like the one quoted in the introduction of this article, expressed the desire for freedom in making their own decisions. Other students recognized the unfortunate reality that attendance does not equal learning: “If a student comes and does not want to learn, that student should have just stayed home. The material won’t be learned either way.” Many students took a consumer-based approach to the subject; one student even used a fast-food analogy to illustrate his point:

A class at a university is something that is paid for, and the people paying for it should own it, not the universities... For example, someone goes to McDonald’s and orders a cheeseburger or two, but after eating the first, they are not hungry. It is their choice to eat the next one. McDonald’s does not refuse to let you buy another one, and McD’s does not care if you come back next time you’re hungry to buy more food.

I had my work cut out for me. Setting aside my dismay from the Big Mac perception

of higher education, I taught both sections of ENGL 1102 using the same workshops, discussion questions, writing prompts and assignment guidelines. Coursework included literary discussions, pre-writing activities, research practice, small-group workshops on writing about literature, and peer review. During the class sessions, I ensured both sections covered valuable information to help students write effective essays analyzing literary works, and most days students were as active as I was during the classroom activities. All along, I kept track of students’ attendance.

At the end of the semester, the results surprised me. To some extent, my records concurred with many professors’ “intuitive relationship between attendance and grades”: “As absences increase, grades decrease” (Gump, 2004, p. 50). In section 8, which met two days a week and where absences did not directly affect the course grade, some students missed more than ten days. Out of twenty-one students completing the course, one failed and one earned a D. These students were absent 14 times and 15 times, respectively. However, it seemed their grades were not entirely connected to attendance. Both students demonstrated behaviors indicating a lack of enthusiasm for academics. The student who failed the course occasionally neglected to turn in her work. The other consistently turned in work the quality of which was just enough to get by. He demonstrated no evidence of effort to improve his writing or interpretive skills, and I wondered if better attendance would have changed his attitude or performance.

I found a marked difference in attendance between section 8 and section 13, which met three days a week and where attendance did directly affect grades. Whereas some students in section 8 accumulated more than ten absences, students in section 13 missed no more than four classes. In fact, a couple of students in section 13 had perfect attendance. At the beginning of my experiment, I hypothesized that section 13 students would earn higher grades than those in section 8, but my records revealed otherwise. While no students in section 13 earned D’s or F’s, grades in that section ranged from A to C, and there seemed to be no correlation between attendance and grades. For instance, of the

22 students who completed the course, three students earned A's. One of those students had perfect attendance. The other two A students had two absences. Of the two students with perfect attendance, one student earned an A, but the other earned a B. Five students in section 13 missed only one day of class. Their grades ranged from A to C. Six students missed four days of class—the maximum allowed without grade penalty. The grades among those students were split: three earned B's, and the other three earned C's.

While section 8's attendance as a whole was poorer, attendance and grade records in that section revealed the same negative relationship between attendance and grades. For instance, two students in section 8 earned A's. One A student was absent 4 times. The other was absent 5 times. While section 8 included no students with perfect attendance, one student had only one absence. By the end of the term, that student had earned a C. Another student was absent eleven times. That student also earned a C.

Grades were not the only data source for my findings, however. The negative relationship between grades and attendance was also evident in my students' effort and writing assignments. Take one student in section 8, for example. Although many students missed between 5 and 10 days, this student missed only two. In a writing assignment at the beginning of the term, this student wrote that he would like to make an A in the course. Although his writing skills were borderline, his effort in class was commendable. When I gave a homework assignment for students to bring one secondary source to class for the next day's workshop, this student brought several. He not only attended all peer reviews but also consulted me after class for assistance with his writing. His regular attendance was indicative of his academic investment, but his analytical writing ability often seemed labored, as in this passage from his paper on Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing":

The mother was tormented in "I Stand Here Ironing" by the fact the she had no man to help her take care of the kids and works at the same time. Growing up back then it is different. The father always works to take care of the family

while the women take care of the kids. It got so hard that the mother has to send her daughter away, "They persuaded me at the clinic to send her away to convalescent home in the county" (Olsen 342).

He began the class with definite writing challenges, and although he seemed to have learned much from the class, he completed it still challenged by analytical writing.

Another student in the same class, however, began with strong analytical, writing and research skills. She worked hard all semester, often reading more sources than were required or putting a bit more effort in her papers than most students did. At the same time, though, she began the class with a stronger writing ability than most students demonstrated. Her work ethic matched her writing performance, as evident in her paper about Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess":

In lines 54-56 [the speaker] says to this servant, "Notice Neptune, though, / Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity, / Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!" This simple sculpture exposes his manipulative nature. He unwittingly reveals in these three lines that he sees this girl as nothing more than an object for him to tame and enjoy. He wants to marry again for the same reasons that he married the first time – to have her all to himself. This marriage in the works will obviously never work and probably won't ever happen.

Even though this writer missed five days, as opposed to the previous student's two, she consistently turned in essays that earned A's, and she made an A in the course.

Attendance and grade records for sections 8 and 13 corroborate Gump's assertions that high scores don't necessarily result from attendance. Neither do strong writing skills. Still, the difference in attendance between sections 8 and 13 corroborates Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb's (2001) observation that attendance rises when absences directly affect grades. Performance in section 13—the absence of D's and F's—also suggests that although good attendance does not guarantee a strong grade, it might ensure success in the class.

Performance serves as further evidence of such a suggestion. For instance, the last assignment of the semester included the following criterion: “Your essay should cite at least two reliable secondary sources in the body paragraphs, not just in the introduction and conclusion.” As I graded papers in section 8, I noticed a handful of papers that omitted citations of secondary sources, included citations of unreliable sources, or cited primary rather than secondary sources. On the other hand, the papers I graded in section 13 met the requirements outlined in the assignment. While section 13 students’ writing quality varied, all section 13 students demonstrated through their research papers a firm understanding of the difference between a primary and secondary source and the difference between a reliable and unreliable source. The students in section 8 received the same written assignment guidelines. They conducted the same research and writing workshops as the students in section 13. Still, when they received their grades and read my feedback on their papers, a handful of them reported that they were unaware that they had not adhered to guidelines.

While I can’t draw a direct cause-effect relationship between their attendance and their performance, I can’t help wondering whether the sparser attendance in section 8 resulted in their weaker understanding of how to write a research paper for a literature class. After all, Marburger (2006) concluded from his study that “students who were absent during a class period were 9 to 14 percent more likely to respond incorrectly to a question pertaining to material covered in their absences than were students who were present” (p. 154). By the same token, students who were absent from my workshop on selecting and evaluating

sources may have been more likely to consult inappropriate sources for the research paper assignment. Further research into this matter would help me draw a firmer relationship between attendance and meeting assignment criteria.

Further investigation might also enable me to determine the extent of my influence on student attendance. As I ponder my data, I can’t help recalling Frideman, Rodriguez and McComb’s (2001) contention that faculty can take absenteeism personally (p.124). The opposite could also be true. St. Clair (1999) contends, and I concur, that “the faculty’s behavior is the basis of the classroom.” I also concur with St. Clair that if my classes are “enjoyable because lively discussion ensues” and if I am “energetic and effective, students may be more likely to attend” (p. 178). Could a classroom with more consistent attendance result in more enthusiasm on the teacher’s part, thereby resulting in a cyclical effect? If so, did the more regular attendance in section 13 result in a stronger rapport between my students and me, which in turn resulted in a stronger desire to attend class? If so, attendance policies could have more positive effects that previously conducted studies might reveal.

While I believe more research is necessary before I draw firm conclusions, my current data suggest that attendance does not make students better writers. However, good attendance might make them better students and improve their chances of success. Such a result could somehow affect their writing skills as well as their performance in other classes. In other words, regular attendance may make the difference in whether students receive a Big Mac of a college education or a four-course meal.

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Teaching for the Future: The Art of Collaboration through Wikis

By Sarah Hunt-Barron

What are the tools students need to be successful outside the walls of our classrooms? With the South Carolina Education and Economic Development Act of 2005, the legislature attempted to bridge the gap between school and the workplace. Teachers will be integrating career interests into instruction in an effort to make school relevant. Although this focus on careers, as an effort to keep students in school, is admirable, the Act has been criticized for narrowing students' interests too early. Perhaps we need to think more globally. What are the skills that *all* of our students will need as they move onto into the real world, regardless of their career choices? What skills will carry our students through the next fifty years, assisting them even in careers not yet conceived?

The Importance of Collaboration

According to Jim Burke (2003), the economic health of our nation may rely on our ability to think creatively through collaboration with others. Tom Friedman (2007) writes that students today need to be great collaborators in order to succeed in the global economy. It can be argued that there are few, if any, jobs today that do not require people to work with others toward a goal. Yet too often in school we focus on the effort of the individual alone. If we use group work at all, it is cautiously, as we may remember the days where one person did the "work" for the group and everyone else sat back passively and watched. How can we engage our students in meaningful work that will teach them the art of collaboration?

In my seventh grade ELA classroom, I found one answer in scaffolding student collaboration in wikis. Wikis are simply web pages that allow people who access the site to add to or modify the content. Wikis became the foundation for group research projects to foster collaboration among peers and engage students in an authentic writing experience in my classroom. In the spirit of collaboration, here's a glimpse into my own experiment with wikis.

Starting small

Students completed a small, individual research project at the start of the year, to review (and in some cases, learn) the basics of research (finding reliable sources, note-taking, and citations). I then introduced the idea of a group research project.

Using a problem-based approach, we discussed a problem we had found while reading a novel. In our case, we had gone on a Webquest before reading Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston's memoir *Farewell to Manzanar* and noticed that there were many sites that contained information about Japanese internment in World War II, but none that presented a holistic picture of the experience. As a class, we chose to create a virtual field trip for others, so they could learn more about different aspects of the internment experience from a single web source. A wiki was the perfect forum for this; we could provide summary information for our readers, relevant images, and link to the best sites on the web to help them gather details. This was a short project; we had just two weeks to finish our site before winter break. This meant if my experiment failed, I would not lose too much time.

Students paired up and brainstormed a list of topics we should include on our "field trip." Together, we created a class list of what could be included, and then we grouped these ideas into logical headings and sub-headings. For example, the Life in the Camp section included pages on jobs, medical care, children and teens, and activities in camp. Then, within each group, the students assigned the sub headings to individuals. I turned as much over to the students as quickly as I could so they had true ownership of this wiki from the start.

Students were given two rubrics, one for individual work and group work. This emphasized the importance of working together as a team. Each student would be graded on his or her sub-topic, but also as part of the group's larger topic. If one member of the group fell short, it would impact everyone's grade, which gave them an incentive to work together.

Benefits of the collaboration

In Smith and Wilhelm's (2002) study of adolescent boys and reading, students discussed the difference between what can be learned in a book and what can be learned from being involved in a social activity; the young men valued knowledge gleaned from the social interaction above that acquired through books alone. I could quickly see the importance of the social component of this project with all my students. As they worked, students talked – and talked a lot. If research had been an isolating experience before, it was not now. The groups would find information and share it with each other, ask each other questions, and, perhaps what I found most rewarding as an ELA teacher, they were working together not only to find information, but to revise their work. Revision became a natural part of their process. Students could accept or reject one another's changes using the history function on the wiki, although more often than not they gratefully accepted the help of their peers.

One benefit to this digital medium was that students were able to work from anywhere at any time. Those students who had access to computers at home could, and often did, make changes in the evenings. Those who only had access from the classroom tended to use their class time very wisely to be sure their work could be finished. Students who had not previously shown an interest in ELA made arrangements to come to my room during bus holding or before homeroom started in the morning.

As a teacher, I was able to fulfill my role as a guide, rather than a dispenser of knowledge. I created mini-lessons that pertained to the work we were doing together, but the bulk of my time was spent alongside students, helping them to interpret information they had found, answering questions, reading drafts with my writers, and participating in a writing workshop environment.

The results were beyond my initial expectations. Most projects were done well, especially for a mere two-week timeframe. Of course, in almost every group there was one student who decided he or she would try and get away with doing as little as possible. However, the rest of the students in that group worked hard and were able to put together some solid research. With such promising initial results on this small project, I decided to

expand our scope. We would create a modern day “quest” wiki, where we examined real world issues and looked for possible solutions.

Expanding the Scope

The “quest” project was a much larger challenge, requiring more skill as independent researchers and collaborators. Small groups of students developed their own inquiry question, choosing a current “problem” to research based upon their interests. Each student within the group approached the topic from a different perspective – historical, social, political, or economic. Topics were varied, from ending teen smoking to time travel. Again, students were exhibiting the behaviors I had hoped to see as researchers and collaborators, but this time I felt too many of the final products fell short. With five groups of students researching five different topics and examining each topic from four different perspectives, I was unable to offer the type of support in finding appropriate sources I had offered on the first project. Students also struggled to understand the different perspectives from which to examine data, even after both individual, small group and whole class discussions. The project did succeed on several fronts. Students became very engaged in their research; so much so that some had trouble moving from research and note-taking to writing the wiki. Two out of the four groups were avid collaborators, taking full advantage of the digital medium for revision and writing. Several students who were previously not highly engaged in my classroom emerged as group leaders.

Tweaking the Assignments

For the past two years, I have continued to “play” with wikis with my students. A new group of students created an online field trip for *Farewell to Manzanar*, but I added more time for the project as well as increased the accountability measures along the way. Students signed a “contract” with dates they agreed to meet at the start. I found with the additional time, students spent more time on the revision stage of the project, adding more links to their wikis, as well as making sure their sources were cited properly. With the use of an online generator (www.citationmachine.net), they were able to create accurate MLA citations with little difficulty. I also gave the students

more time to work on the project – instead of saving it until after we had read the book, we started working on the research component as we were reading the memoir, allowing students to readily explore areas of interest they were uncovering in literature.

A year later, I made some big changes to our “quest.” Rather than allowing small groups of students to choose one “modern day quest” and focus on it from different perspectives (social, economic, historical, or political), I decided to have the class choose one issue together. As a group, we would all research this topic, and then small groups could examine the topic from one perspective. This was a much more successful strategy. Having each student work from the same perspective within a group was helpful; they were able to scaffold each other’s learning and help one another understand what it meant to look at history through that particular lens. The process went more smoothly and the level of discussion within each small group deepened. I knew how to focus my discussions with small groups and I was able to help each small group find resources more easily. Students could be heard arguing about the merits of a certain piece of information; should it be included and why or why not. The final results were much improved from the previous year.

Lessons Learned

Before beginning this process, I had hoped that using wikis would engage my students in research and foster collaboration. What I found was wikis did even more; they made my classroom a more democratic environment, where students contributions were all valued and voices could be heard. Not only did students work collaboratively, but reciprocal teaching was also going on daily. Students were very concerned about what they wrote, knowing they potentially had a worldwide audience. They were creative in their research and final products; many of my students seem to find their voice through this writing. In particular, Ahmed was a student whose writing tended to be a bit wooden. Encouragement and suggestions from his peers, as well as a real audience, transformed his writing. In his wiki on spies during World War II, his readers really get a glimpse of his personality:

“Do you think that Pearl Harbor was a successful attack just because it was a surprise attack? Well, the answer is no. The Japanese had a spy, Takeo Yoshikawa, who spied on Pearl Harbor from a tea house on a mountain side that conveniently had a telescope or two to enhance the view. The tea house was in the Alewa Heights section, north of downtown Honolulu. Sometimes he would go to the cane fields at Aiea north of two bases. From other nearby slopes he could see the submarine facilities. And a pier at Pearl City to the northwest enabled him to view the far side of Ford Island and its airstrip. He used all these places, all of them near Pearl Harbor, to get the information he needed to Japan, but if he looked closely at the harbor entrance, he would have seen the anti-submarine nets guarding it.”

Perhaps most importantly, students not only enjoyed this process, but also learned much from it. My students surveyed at year-end echoed Smith and Wilhelm’s research on adolescent males (2002):

- “Working together on projects somehow helps me to remember things easier.”
- “It helped me with social skills and I was able to learn tips from other students on researching. And it was fun.”
- “You get to experience other ideas from another point of view, and it could actually help you understand better.”
- “The work doesn’t seem so hard compared to when you are all on your own.”
- “I liked that I got to have social time with my friends, but at the same time I was learning.”

According to Brown, Collins, and DuGuid (1989), the knowledge students’ gain cannot be separated from activity: “Learning and cognition... are fundamentally situated” (p. 32). Students can only benefit from authentic opportunities in our classrooms. None of us have a crystal ball; we cannot see what the future will hold for our students, nor for our economy. We need to embrace the tools at our

disposal and give our students room to explore and create their own understandings of our

world. Wikis allow us to do this, and prepare them for a future that even we cannot see.

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Literature Circles and That Pesky Need for Assessment

By Debbie Bandy

Literature circles have been around since 1993, when Harvey Daniels and his colleagues in the Chicago area decided to try the book club model in the classroom. Since then, variations of literature circles have been used throughout the country. My first foray into literature circles was with my 6th grade students in our study of *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry* by Mildred Taylor. Since this was our first time with this method, we used role sheets and Thinkmarks to help guide our questions and insights. The results were astonishing; all students participated in the lively discussions and debates. They thrived on the atmosphere of openness in which *their* ideas guided the discussion, not mine. Their insights had depth and feeling, and I am sure that their understanding of the novel is richer than if I had lectured with handouts.

But here's the problem. I *am* sure that their understanding is deeper. But how do I assess this? How do I assess discussion, insight, understanding, knowledge of literary elements, and so on? This question motivated me to do some research to find out how other teachers have approached the problem of assessing literature circles.

From the beginning of my research, I discovered that I am not the only person with this question. Burga's (2000) article, "Living and Learning: A Four-Year Journey into Literature Circles," expresses the same frustrations:

This is such a good idea, but it is just not working the way we want it to.

The kids are reading and talking and writing about books, but we spend our time rushing from one group to another... And every time we turn around we are starting a new book. And I think the kids are getting burned out on all this reading, even though they are getting to choose the books and they're great choices. And how do we grade these things? But, this is such a great idea! What do we do? (p.18)

I was not alone! I continued reading Burda's article, looking for her answers to assessment. She did not address the issue specifically until she wrote about her fourth year with literature circles. At this point, she offered her idea of a group reflection sheet. This worksheet asks the group to offer three things the group did well today and one thing they would like to improve. She calls this "Three Pluses and a Wish." She also asks for individual responses to the literature. She requires some of these responses to be in the "five paragraph clarification genre" since her school district requires this type of writing on standardized tests. Burda closes her article with an enthusiastic endorsement of literature circles, and she sets goals to implement them more effectively. But that pesky assessment issue still rears its head: "Assessment and evaluation on responses to the literature continue to be my greatest challenges" (p. 22).

Gilbert (2000), a fifth grade teacher in Sylva, North Carolina, shares her ideas on using literature circles in another article. In the conclusion she states, "For me, the hardest part about conducting literature circles is assessment" (p. 14). The solutions she shares include the three pluses and one wish idea used by Burda. Gilbert adds an individual metacognition response sheet where each student reflects on his or her role, both in the group and individually (p. 15).

Both of these practicing teachers encouraged me in my quest for literature assessment tools. The solutions they shared have that element of student input essential to literature groups. But I have to give a grade, a numerical grade, at the end of every quarter. So I decided to keep reading to garner other ideas from those more experienced than I.

My search led me back to Harvey Daniels. His book *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups* (2004) includes a chapter on assessment. His practical ideas include individual and group assessments

as well as assessments generated by teachers and by students. A few of his teacher-generated assessments include the following:

1. A daily stamp is as simple record-keeping device. Is the student prepared when he or she comes to the literature circle? Yes or no. (p. 189)
2. Anecdotal records by the teachers can be incorporated into assessments. What are the strengths of this student? What skills need to be reinforced? The teacher rotates to different groups each day and records observations. (p. 190)
3. Conferencing also helps in identifying individual student's strengths and weaknesses. (p. 197)
4. Book projects are used to assess knowledge of the book. In a companion book, *Mini-lessons for Literature Circles*, Daniels and Steineke present a list of assessment ideas that they feel are authentic. (Daniels & Steineke, 2004, p. 194)

Daniels values students as competent assessors, and, in one whole-class exercise, he asks his students to identify the traits of a good literature circle member. He records these ideas on the board, helping the students whittle them down to five or six. Then they discuss what point value to give to each of these characteristics. At the end of one such session, third graders had generated this chart:

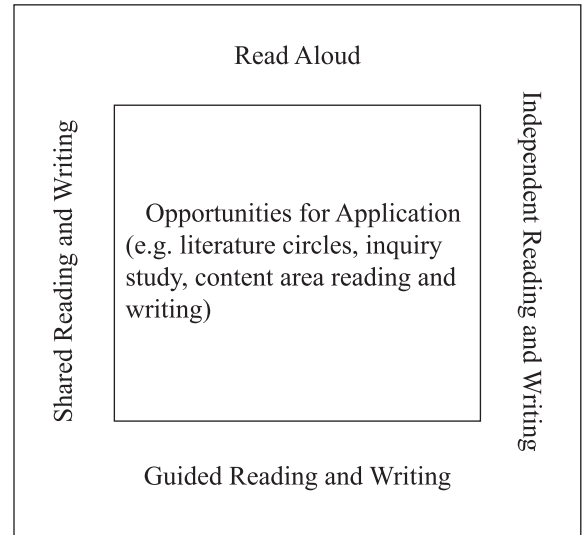
Literature Circles Scoring Guide – Room 206

Ingredient	Value	My Score
Do the reading	25	
Listen to other people	15	
Have good ideas	30	
Ask people questions	15	
Stick to the book	10	
Dress nice	5	

Daniels states that middle school students and high school students come up with similar ideas – except for the “dress nice” (p. 196). Any classroom teacher can adopt these practical ideas.

Literature circles operate within a larger context of language instruction. Schlick-Noe (2006) of Seattle University sponsors a website

“Literature Circles Resource Center.” This site provides information on all aspects of literature circles. The following table illustrates the place literature circles play in a complete language arts program.



For me, seeing that literature circles are part of the language arts program frees me from the need to assess every minute detail of literature circles.

As I begin my next foray into literature circles, I am encouraged to find so many avenues of assessment. I am also encouraged in knowing that other teachers have grappled with the question and experimented with methods that work in their individual classrooms. This variety of methods gives me the confidence to try my ideas, accepting that it will be necessary to tweak them along the way.

In conclusion, I offer an assessment plan for literature circles that is based on using portfolios. This plan is open to revision at any point along the way.

Each student will have a portfolio in which to put his or her work. This portfolio will include the following:

1. A Thinkmark (<http://www.learner.org/channel/workshops/engagingliterature/support/thinkmark.pdf>) will be my way of monitoring whether they are prepared for class. As they read the passage in preparation for literature circles, students use the

Thinkmark to record questions, insights, vocabulary, etc. about the passage read, and they bring this to their literature group meeting.

2. This portfolio will also include any role sheets, such as discussion leader, wordsmith, line lighter. This will give both the student and me a record of their participation in group discussion.
3. A student-generated performance rubric based on the one developed by Daniels and his third graders will be included.

4. Any cumulative assessments that we as a class may decide on will be part of the portfolio.

When time for a literature circle grade approaches, I will weigh all the material and make my assessment. In individual conferencing, I will discuss the decision, making adjustments to the grade, if necessary. This grade will then be a portion of their final grade in language arts.

Using the pooled knowledge and experience of colleagues, I am ready to again delve into literature circles, more confident that I am working toward authentic assessment.

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A Glimpse into the Good Old Days: Stirring Lessons for S.C. from Schools in Opit, Uganda

By Inga Puffer

“Kids didn’t act this way when I was young; they expect too much. When did it become our job to *entertain* them?” I hear these echoes of worry in the hallway as I race from copy machine to my computer hunting for rap songs to incorporate into my lessons; I search for art projects, hands-on activities, and games to engage students. I move from journals, to blogs, then to wikis. I shrink my lessons to sound bites. All of this to keep my students enthusiastic and engaged as I strive to make classroom instruction authentic and culturally relevant. To me, it’s all worth it if kids are learning.

“Sometimes, kids just need to sit down and listen,” teachers sigh, exhausted or defeated by the constant competition for student’s interest. If I’m honest, sometimes I wonder the same thing. I wonder exactly what lessons I’m teaching my students as I reinvent my classroom to keep them engaged. Am I reinforcing the cultural idea that only the flashiest, most novel ideas deserve attention? This question weighs on my mind as I struggle to decide the direction of my classroom and my future students. Are American kids irreparably spoiled and entitled by their media-saturated, privileged-society upbringing? And if so, should we get back to the *good old days* when school stuck with teaching the basics, when students were respectful and “knew how to behave?”

I’ve always been one of those people who thought the good old days never existed. Then, I found them.

The good old days?

Last summer I spent six weeks teaching Primary 7, 12-15 year old students in a displacement camp in Opit, Uganda - a war-torn area where students who have little are taught with the bare minimum. Going to Africa had been a lifelong dream. I wanted to see what was beyond my privileged Western life. Maybe, I thought, if I leave the drive-through coffee, TV, running water, and hair dryer behind, I could get

a better grasp of what truly matters. In Opit, I gained new perspective on my own American privilege and that of my students.

The disparity I saw between the life in Opit and the one I am used to in the U.S. was unsettling. In the 1980’s, villagers living in Northern Uganda left their homes and moved to the Opit displacement camp in an attempt to escape war-related violence. Today, their crowded huts cluster between heaps of trash. For food, most families rely on bags of grain from the World Food Project. Residents are beginning to contemplate returning home to farm, but the process is slow and frightening.

Village schools relocated to Opit Displacement Camp along with their students. Teachers there face challenges that seem insurmountable. Corruption means that teachers who don’t go to school are still on the payroll, leaving larger and larger classes for the teachers who care. Many Head Teachers are hired because of *who* they know, not *what* they know. Classes of up to 100 students are crammed into a single room, “learning,” often with no teacher present. And these are the lucky 100.

But everything about Uganda wasn’t as foreign as I had imagined. In fact, the warm climate, the tall corn plants, and the slow, chatty greetings reminded me of my small hometown in rural South Carolina. I thought of the abandoned shacks along the now busy I-95 and imagined South Carolina the way my mama describes it as she grew up in Bishopville in the 50’s. I wondered if Ugandan schools too resembled the schools from South Carolina’s past.

My Ugandan teaching career began abruptly. Arriving at school early one morning expecting to discuss my schedule, I was met by a teacher under a tree who thanked me for coming, handed me two pieces of chalk, and pointed me towards a classroom.

“Good Morning, Madame. Welcome to our class,” the students greeted me with this memorized mantra of respect. When I got

over the shock of such formality, I gave out notebooks and an introductory journaling assignment. I expected questions, maybe a grumble. That's what would happen in Greenville. Here, heads bowed and work began. Sixty students, even ones for whom my assignment was strikingly inappropriate for their limited (or nonexistent) English vocabulary, worked busily. Excited by the captive audience, I did the teacher thing - seeing an opportunity to inform, I explained future tense (in words I now realize few students comprehended). Still, every student gave me his/her full attention. I was shocked. Maybe this is what the older teachers were talking about when they refer to "the good old days when kids listened and were respectful." Maybe this is what SC was like 50 years ago. Huh - maybe *the good old days* do exist - in war-torn Africa.

But there is a problem with the old days, with this antiquated model of school. Students aren't learning. Students sit quietly. They seem glad to be in school. But why? In Opit, there were no frills; often there were no teachers. School libraries in Opit consist of outdated workbooks. School is taught in English by non-natives to students who aren't functional speakers. Teacher-centric lectures are the norm. Even debate is formulaic, taught with an emphasis on Robert's rules, not critical thinking. Authentic learning experiences aren't a luxury afforded there. Without deep learning and without much hope of continued education, what drove the students' diligence?

I asked my Ugandan students what motivated them. Mostly, I received canned answers, "Education is the key to success," one of the school's mottos, or "I want to pass the P.L.E. Exam." But these students dreamed big. Though few students had the money for secondary school, most planned on becoming members of parliament, doctors, or even presidents of the United States. Students dreamed of moving to America, driving a car, becoming rich, and having many houses and many children. They dream of having what my U.S. students have. Few Ugandan students believed these dreams were attainable, but they understood the power of hope.

Hope is all the students in Uganda have. School brings that hope. The kids attending P7 know they are the privileged few. They could

afford a uniform; another brother or sister is at home taking care of the smaller children. These students' parents have sacrificed for their education. Only about a fourth of students who begin primary school stay enrolled through P7. Kids there believe education is the way to a more secure, better life. Even if that education is developmentally inappropriate and didactic. Kids here take education seriously, dreaming of enough to eat, a nice house, taking care of their families and perhaps even digital cable.

Moving Forward

After the summer, I wondered how I would feel returning to the U.S. to teach. How would I feel when students' eyes drift towards the windows before I even begin to speak? Would I resent being driven daily to be more inventive, more interesting, more cutting edge to hold the interest of my students? Would I be bitter when students complain about their privileged education? Should I scold them for their sense of entitlement, using the familiar empty-your-plate guilt trip: "Kids in Africa would be so grateful to have what you have!"

This year I did have moments of frustration, wishing my students were more grateful for their education, lamenting that even my best attempts at kinesthetic, personalized learning weren't enough to reach all my students. I want my students to be grateful for each piece of notebook paper they have, their laptops, and Google. I want them to be grateful for the opportunity to be exposed to new ideas and to think for themselves.

But I do not long for *the good old days*. I remember the lessons that I learned in Uganda, not about my students' ungratefulness, but my own. I am now more thankful for the state of education in America and the privilege to be a teacher here. Because I suspect that the good old days of lecturing to an unquestioning group of silent students is indicative of a time and situation of desperation. Critical thinking, questioning, and even boredom require basic needs to be met. I am driven to strive for a system where diversity in learning styles is valued and where fostering intrinsic motivation is the universal goal.

I can be as spoiled as my students: forgetting to be thankful for my notebooks, library, wireless internet and smart board that allow

me to create innovative lessons that capture the short attention span of my students. What a gift to have materials to activate and deepen learning. What a gift to teach students who have the luxury of having their needs met. Even at my Title I School, where 85% of students live below the poverty line, most students have food, shelter, and clothing. What a gift to teach student who have enough exposure to information to ask “Why?” The challenge to find ways to activate intrinsic motivation from the love of learning and the excitement of inquiry - instead of desperation- is a privilege.

I am thankful for my Ugandan students who inspire me with their perseverance and hope. I am thankful for my thoughtful, spirited American

students who rise to the challenges of their education with creativity and zeal. I am thankful, too, for the challenge that few nations’ teachers enjoy: the challenge to foster intrinsic motivation in students, to make them wonder, to expose them to their privileged position on the global scale and the responsibility that is attached, and to teach them to wield the freedom with care.

As educators in this prosperous nation, we are in a position to ask exciting, cutting edge questions: How do we make students aware of their connectedness to the rest of humanity? How do we cultivate intrinsic motivation and foster hope? How do we push the limits of education to stir the soul?

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Literature or Literacy: Searching for Harmony

By Susan Culver Dobbins

When it comes to the end of day
All I gotta do is say,
“I want choice
And I want fun.
I wanna be the coolest
Son of a gun!”

*I'll smooth my bun
And straighten my pearls.
My brogans are polished,
My chin held high.
It's the classics, buster,
Or I think I'll just die!*

Janet Allen says entice them
Wilhelm wants to act
Atwell opts for workshops
While Harvey Daniels likes to chat.

*Michael Clay Thompson
Is the man of the day, with
James Joyce and old Hawthorne,
Homer and Hamlet, sweet Louisa May.
I think William F. Buckley
Should really hold sway!*

Have them read Draper
And Walter Dean Myers,
Potter at Hogwarts,
Eragon's dragon fires,
Vampires in *Twilight* and even the Cliques.
Thanks, Cris Tovani, we've got this baby licked!

*Well, what about Newberys
And Chronicles of Narnia,
Paulsen and Patterson, Cynthia Voight?
With these noted authors, our choice is adroit.
Reflections, connections, a notebook or two,
Best practices in literacy we will pursue!*

You know, maybe classics
Have something to teach us.
We might switch *Treasure Island*
To a classic of choice
Like *Alice in Wonderland* or
Mark Twain's pirate boys.

*And maybe a lit circle
And a workshop or two
With Jess Anderson's grammar
And Harry Noden to boot.*

We will write!

We must read!

**Literature AND literacy
On this we're agreed.
Together we'll reach them.
Each other we need.**

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