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Teachers as Researchers of New Literacies: Reflections on Qualitative Self-Study

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In this article, a beginning teacher, experienced teacher, and teacher educator reflect upon their experiences with qualitative self-studies of language and literacy in teacher education courses. The goal of these course projects was to introduce teachers to sociocultural theories, qualitative research, and “new” literacies. Sharing excerpts from teachers’ self-studies of blogging and a massively multi-player on-line role-playing game, we illustrate how small-scale self-studies may help teachers begin to develop notions of language and literacy as social practices, demystify educational research, and bridge perceived “theory” and “practice” divides in teacher education. We offer individual and collective reflections on our work to help teacher educators consider how qualitative self-study might make sociocultural perspectives and new literacies more accessible and tangible to practicing teachers.

Keywords: qualitative self-study, New Literacy Studies, studies of new literacies, theory and practice

Over the last two decades, the New Literacy Studies has accounted for a majority of language and literacy research published in major, peer-reviewed journals (Beach, Green, Kamil, & Shanahan, 2005; Dressman, 2007; Brass & Burns, 2011). The emergence of the NLS has established more expansive definitions of literacy as social practice that go beyond traditional conceptions of literacy as simply decoding and comprehending print-based texts (New London Group, 1996; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007;). However, while the New Literacy Studies has clearly established itself among language and literacy researchers, teacher education has been slow to adopt sociocultural perspectives or engage the diversity of contemporary language and literacy practices (Larson & Marsh, 2005; Street, 2005; Rowsell, Kosnick, & Beck, 2008).

This article explores how the use of qualitative self-studies in teacher education might offer teachers a useful initiation into the New Literacy Studies. After describing approaches to qualitative field studies in two graduate courses at the University of Cincinnati, we offer reflections on qualitative self-studies from our respective vantage points as beginning teacher (Bryan), experienced teacher (Kim), and teacher educator (Jory). The article closes with our reflection on the ways in which qualitative self-study might contribute to teachers' and teacher educators' ways of understanding language and literacy inside and outside of K-12 schools. We hope that our article will encourage teacher educators to consider teachers as potential researchers of language and literacy and to develop course experiences that offer educators a situated knowledge of new literacies, sociocultural theories, and the practice of educational research.

The “New Literacy Studies” and “studies of new literacies”

This article addresses an important disconnect between teacher education in language and literacy and two key trends in language and literacy research—the prominence of “The New Literacy Studies” and recent spike in “studies of new literacies” associated with new media, information communications technologies, and web 2.0.

“The New Literacy Studies,” or NLS, represents multiple strands of *sociocultural* research that emerged in the 1980s as part of a “social turn” in language and literacy studies away from a focus on individual cognition towards an emphasis on literacy as social practice (Gee, 1999; Cushman et al, 2001). For sociocultural scholars, the NLS offered a necessary alternative to the cognitive and psycholinguistic studies that dominated language and literacy education between the 1960s and 1980s. Prior to the social turn, reading and writing research primarily examined cognitive processes “in the head” or linguistic phenomena “on the page” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Dressman, 2007; Gee, 2009; Brass & Burns, 2011). Often in opposition to these psycholinguistic traditions, the NLS posited that language and literacy did “not just reside in people’s heads as a set of skills to be learned, nor . . . reside on paper, captured as texts to be analyzed” (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 3). Rather, from a sociocultural perspective, language and literacy were fundamentally social practices that were situated in particular social, cultural, historical, and institutional contexts:

The NLS saw literacy as something people did not inside their heads but inside society. It argued that literacy was not primarily a mental phenomenon, but, rather, a sociocultural one. Literacy was a social and cultural achievement—it was about ways of participating in social and cultural groups—not just mental achievement. Thus, literacy needed to be

understood and studied in its full range of contexts—not just cognitive—but social, cultural, historical, and institutional, as well. (Gee, 2009, p. 2)

At its core, sociocultural research foregrounds how the meanings and uses of literacy are situated in particular communities, patterned by sociopolitical relationships, and invested with particular norms and values. As Gee (2009) has noted, people do not simply read and write “in general”—they read and write specific sorts of texts in specific ways that are situated in specific contexts and shaped by culturally patterned ways of knowing, being, and doing. Thus, it is misleading to make universal claims about “literacy” and its cognitive consequences because literate practice assumes different shapes, meanings, and values in different contexts, such as a youth zine culture, online chat space, feminist reading group, or different religious ceremonies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006).

Another trend in the research literature in language and literacy has been the emergence of “studies of new literacies,” including fan fiction, blogging, digital composing, social media, and on-line gaming (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Following the publication of the New London Group’s (1996) influential treatise on *multiliteracies*, language and literacy research has increasingly documented how literate practices in contemporary personal, social, civic, and economic life have been influenced by increasing cultural and linguistic diversity, multimodality, and the proliferation of new media and digital technologies (New London Group, 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). This line of research has complicated simplistic notions of literacy and expanded inquiry in the field well beyond its traditional focus on typographic texts and school-based forms of literacy.

The “New Literacy Studies” and “studies of new literacies” may or may not intersect in contemporary research (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). For example, the NLS has made an important contribution by documenting diverse literacy practices across contexts; however, until recently, a considerable majority of sociocultural research has emphasized print-based forms of literacy—not the social practices associated with popular culture, new media, and web 2.0. At the same time, some studies of new literacies have adopted traditional modes of linguistic or cognitive analysis that overlook much of what is socially and culturally “new” about “new literacies” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; see Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008; Tierney, 2009). For Lankshear & Knobel (2006), the most generative lines of contemporary research employ socio-cultural methodologies—the NLS—towards the study of “new literacies.” By studying new literacies as social practices, scholars and practitioners can recognize the qualitatively different social norms and relationships that shape and are shaped by contemporary configurations of literate practice:

The more a literacy practice privileges participation over publishing, distributed expertise over centralized expertise, collective intelligence over individualized possessive intelligence, collaboration over individuated authorship, dispersion over scarcity, sharing over ownership, experimentation over “normalization”, innovation and evolution over stability and fixity, creative-innovative rule breaking over generic purity and policing, Phase 2 automation over Phase I automation, relationship over information broadcast, and so on, the more we should regard it as a “new” literacy (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p. 60).

The “New Literacy Studies” and “studies of new literacies” have clearly influenced language and literacy *research* in important ways. In contrast, *teacher education* in reading, literacy, and the English language arts often has maintained a cognitive focus on reading and writing processes, essayist forms of literacy, and traditional, print-based texts (Rowse, Kosnick, & Beck, 2008; Street, 2005). Given this disconnect in language and literacy education, some scholars have pushed for teacher education courses to adopt sociocultural orientations and account for the diversity of language and literacy practices that constitute early 21st century personal, social, civic, and economic life (Larson, 2005; Street, 2005; Rowse, Kosnick, & Beck, 2008). In response to this disconnect, our article explores a small effort at the University of Cincinnati to align two master’s courses with the field’s shift towards sociocultural perspectives and expanded notions of literacy that recognize the salience of cultural and linguistic diversity, multimodality, and digital texts.

Qualitative Self-Studies of New Literacies

In 2007-2008, Jory began teaching graduate courses in literacy at the University of Cincinnati, an urban research university with a regional student body. At that time, the Literacy programs only included two 10-week courses on sociocultural perspectives on language and literacy—one at the master’s level and one at the doctoral level. Outside of these two courses, the graduate programs in reading and literacy were either rooted in whole language approaches or cognitive reading and writing strategies. This reflected the faculties’ areas of expertise and a push at the state level to offer teachers professional endorsements or certificates largely based on cognitive approaches aligned with narrow, federal definitions of “scientifically based research” (Feuer, Towne, and Shavelson, 2002). In this context, teachers and graduate students had minimal opportunities and support to conceive of literacy in sociocultural terms or to consider the implications of new literacies for schools and society.

Given these programmatic limitations, Jory pushed the School of Education to offer special topics seminars at the graduate level that would provide a brief introduction to the New Literacy Studies and studies of new literacies. Working within the university’s quarter system, he created a 10-week doctoral seminar that offered a skeletal introduction to NLS scholarship and required graduate students to conduct small-scale, qualitative inquiry. This is a typical assignment for a doctoral course; however, when he was assigned literacy master’s courses in subsequent years, Jory wondered what small-scale qualitative research might offer teachers and master’s level certification students who were not preparing for careers in educational research?

Between 2009 and 2011, he designed two master’s courses—*Literacy as Linguistic and Cultural Tool* and *New Literacies & 21st Century Schools*—that required educators to conduct small-scale qualitative research. *Literacy as a Linguistic and Cultural Tool* was a quarter-length course (10 weeks) that provided an abbreviated introduction to sociocultural theories and weekly discussions of ethnographies and case studies of language and literacy. The course opened with introductions to ethnography, the discussion of Heath’s (1983) *Ways with Words*, and focused discussions on three prominent units of analysis in sociocultural research in language and literacy: literacy events, literacy practices, and funds of knowledge. The middle weeks of the course explored qualitative studies of language and literacy practices across in-school and out-of-

school contexts. Finally, the last weeks of the course explored case studies of K-12 classrooms influenced by sociocultural and critical conceptions of language, literacy, and schooling.

In addition to weekly seminar discussions of required readings, the last six weeks of the course added the Mini-Field Study assignment, which asked educators to “document and interpret the meanings and uses of literacy in a specific context/community (which could be on-line).” To build on the first four weeks of the course, the Field Study required each student to choose one (or more) sociocultural unit of analysis—literacy events, literacy practices, and funds of knowledge—and *use* that construct to orient their observations of a specific community or space, to “play with the ethnographic gaze,” and “try on the identity of a qualitative researcher.” Given the constraints of a course that only met for two hours and twenty minutes weekly over ten weeks, Jory offered students’ minimal support across the six-week project:

- In the fifth week of the course, he required an informal, one-page proposal where each student identified his or her area of inquiry, chose a unit of analysis, and outlined ideas for data collection and analysis; he provided brief, written feedback on these proposals to help everyone choose a project with a reasonable scale and focus their data collection and analysis on literacy events and/or practices.
- In the sixth week, the seminar devoted 45 minutes to joint-inquiry in class where we watched excerpts from the film, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, to document “literacy events” (Heath, 1983) and infer “literacy practices” by observing young witches’ and wizards’ literacies in- and out-of-Hogwarts. In the first viewing of three scenes, the class took field notes independently to document any literacy events represented in the film. In the second viewing, the class interrupted the film to identify a specific literacy event; then, we paused the scene to shift our analysis from literacy events to literacy practices, using guiding questions from Street & Lefstein (2007) and Barton & Hamilton’s (2000) six propositions about literacy as social practice to shape our discussions.¹
- The last month emphasized seminar discussions of course readings; however, the seminar provided three small supports for the mini-field studies. One, each of our discussions emphasized (a) the key constructs in the field studies (e.g. literacy events/practices, funds of knowledge), (b) the genre(s) of academic articles, and (c) a few moments of each course to “read like a researcher” by discussing how course readings might be relevant to our own studies. Two, we left roughly ten minutes at the end of each class to discussions questions, concerns, or progress with the field studies. Finally, we devoted 45 minutes of the last class to workshop rough drafts of project. Outside of these minimal supports, students largely conducted their studies out of class with little faculty input or guidance.

We anticipate that master’s students would benefit from more support and more extensive experiences with sociocultural studies of literacy. However, despite the compressed time frame and minimal research support, many teachers produced viable, if not publishable qualitative studies. The first group of papers included studies of fan fiction, *Pokémon*, on-line gaming, workplace literacies, and the sanctioned and unsanctioned literacy practices of a 4th grade classroom. Jory had assumed (correctly) that most teachers would study the literacy practices of school-aged youth, if not their own students; however, two of the strongest projects were *self-*

studies, including a study of how power relationships shaped workplace literacy practices in one teacher's former corporate job—and Bryan's study of literacy and learning in the world of online gaming (see following section).

Given the strength of these self-studies, Jory required a qualitative self-study in a second master's course, *New Literacies and 21st Century Schools*—a special topics course that introduced sociocultural perspectives on new literacies and web 2.0. Due to schedule quirks and holidays, this master's seminar only met for seven weeks in spring, 2011; thus, the course provided a brief introduction to “new literacies” by reading Lankshear & Knobel's (2006) *New Literacies* before setting the class loose to (1) choose one *new* literacy practice of interest to them, (2) acculturate themselves into a particular community or space mediated by that new literacy, and (3) document these social processes qualitatively. This project was different from the mini-field study (previous course) in the sense that this class was required to *study themselves* and limit their inquiry to a “new literacy.” In addition, this course placed less emphasis on sociocultural research and theory and more emphasis on what constituted “new literacies” (from a sociocultural perspective) and how they might be relevant to schools and K-12 classrooms. Thus, instead of scaffolding these qualitative self-studies in class, each seminar created space for teachers to discuss their self-studies in relation to three course texts: Lankshear & Knobel's (2006) *New Literacies*, Gee's (2004) *Situated Language and Learning*, and Beach et al.'s (2009) *Teaching Writing Using Blogs, Wikis, and other Digital Tools*. On the last night of class, each student presented his or her research in a conference-style presentation and engaged in roundtable discussions of everyone's work.

Again, in spite of limited time and support, the course was extremely popular among graduate students, all but one of whom were practicing teachers or teachers who had recently left the classroom. Kim, an experienced middle school teacher, found that her qualitative self-study not only lent itself to a more situated understanding of new literacies, but a means to rethink how she had approached professional development in technology for other teachers in her school district (see following sections).

Over the rest of this article, we offer our different perspectives on qualitative self-studies of new literacies to consider how this approach may or may not offer teachers a viable entry point to sociocultural theorizing and the social practices of new literacies and web 2.0. First, Bryan, at the time a beginning English teacher, offers an overview of his study of WAR and his ideas on how studies of literacy and learning on-line might inform how teachers evaluate opportunities for literacy and learning in K-12 classrooms. Then, Kim, an experienced teacher in gifted education and educational technology, reviews her self-study of educational blogging and the ways in which a more social understanding not only helped her rethink blogging, but her practice as a teacher and professional development coordinator in her school district. The article concludes with a collaboratively written discussion where we draw upon sociocultural concepts to consider what qualitative self-study might offer educators and teacher educators.

Warhammer On-line: Bryan's Self-Study

A few months after completing my student teaching placement in high school English, I took a master's course with Jory called *Literacy as a Linguistic and Cultural Tool*. The main project in the course was a “Mini-Field Study” that asked us to document literacy events or literacy

practices within a particular community, context, or on-line space. For my field study, I joined the Warrior Poets—a guild of 30-40 on-line gamers—to study language, literacy, and learning within the Massively Multiplayer On-line Role Playing Game, WAR (electronic arts, 2008).

WAR is a game of player versus player combat between two opposing factions—the *Side of Order* and *Side of Destruction*. Players on the *Side of Order* can play as the character of a human, dwarf, or high elf. Players on the *Side of Destruction* can play as a human, greenskin (orcs and goblins), or dark elf. It is paramount for players to play their own characters well and to work as a team as they fight the opposing faction in player versus player combat, battle monsters within the game, complete quests issued by non-player characters, and work towards the ultimate goal of destroying the opposing faction's cities and forces.

My field study blended the roles of participant and observer. To study my learning and literacy, I took field notes over my gaming experience, saved and analyzed screen shots, and participated in message board discussions and personal interviews with members of the guild over voice chat programs and telephone. This helped me understand the norms of the guild and game and analyze my own attempt to transition from a novice, or newbie, to more experienced member of the Warrior Poets. Ultimately, however, the only way to document what counted as “learning” and “literacy” within this on-line gaming world was to jump in and fully participate; thus, over the course of four weeks and 48 hours of playtime, I joined in with the Warrior Poets to document their literacy practices and aid them in their quest for domination.

From professional newbie to relative insider. My foray into the world of WAR began with a phone call to a friend who was a leader of the Warrior Poets guild. I explained my interest in joining the guild and studying its social practices for my master's course. She explained my intentions to the guild and had me introduce myself. The Warrior Poets happily allowed me to join the guild, which began as a small group of friends playing the game “Neverwinter Nights” and eventually grew into a large, cross-game group. Once the guild added me to its roster, I installed the game to my computer and created my own avatar—enter “DarkPurist,” professional newbie—and chose my avatar's look, name, statistics, profession, and faction. My character was a goblin shaman; my main job within the guild's gaming was to heal teammates when they were injured.

Within a sociocultural framework, “learning” refers to a change in participation within the life of a particular social group or community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Larson & Marsh, 2005). The Warrior Poets guild is an excellent example of a “community of practice” because it is a community in which knowledge and expertise is shared and distributed among its members. At the beginning of my self-study, I considered myself a “professional newbie” because I had done some gaming previously, but I was new to WAR and the Warrior Poets guild. Over a month of gaming, I was able to move from a newbie to the game and the guild to a trusted member of WP. I obviously did not join in enough to move into any sort of leadership role, but other members of WP were able to count on me to keep them on their feet during a battle. I am able to say I became an effective goblin shaman.

My expanding participation within the Warrior Poets guild was facilitated by different literacy practices. One of the first communication tools I had to learn was Ventrillo, a free, voice chat

system used over the internet that the guild used for real time instruction and coordination. The guild followed strict rules in the voice chat channel during combat operations. Designated war leaders called out orders and instructions through a microphone; other players were expected to remain silent and follow orders—unless they noticed something unusual in the heat of battle that was cause to break protocol, such as the impending onslaught of miniature blacksmiths or dwarves. Experienced players explained these rules explicitly to newbies to help acculturate them into the norms of playing.

The Warrior Poets also interacted through and around an on-line forum connected to the game. The most informative parts of the forums were character guides that members had written that provided detailed knowledge of character builds and play styles and video instructions that detailed their knowledge of large scale boss fights, or raids within the game. This allowed new members to learn from their peers and from experts.

WAR required maximum team work, and many of the literacy practices that involved Ventrillo and the forum provided means for individuals within the guild to share their specialized skill sets and unique funds of knowledge. Some players were excellent warriors and were able to share their knowledge of in-game battles and tactics which worked against separate types of enemy players. Others in the guild could use and share their knowledge of computer programming, game development, and historical knowledge. Gamers also develop bonds with each other through their shared participation within the goal-directed activities and literacy practices of the game and guild. Since the Warrior Poets readily shared knowledge and expertise in the context of gaming with the newly guilded, I was able to race through levels fairly quickly.

For example, when creating a new character, you are given points to “spend” in different attributes and skills. Because I was new to the game and was unsure of how to best use these points, I turned to the forums before finalizing my new character. There I found a guide on a goblin shaman’s best practices. After reading, I logged in to Ventrillo and asked the group if what I had read was correct. After some helpful hints, I spent the points and began playing the game. Without access to the guild’s funds of knowledge, I would have likely spent points in skills or abilities that would have been less useful for the character type.

Learning principles in on-line gaming. My opportunities to improve my status and skills within the Warrior Poets were also facilitated by learning principles that are prominent within the gaming industry. Through the self-study project, I documented several learning principles that James Gee (2003) has discussed in his research on gaming and literacy, such as the *discovery principle*, the *just-in-time principle*, and the *psycho-social moratorium principle*.

First, WAR employs what Gee (2003) called the “Discovery Principle,” where “overt telling is kept to a well-thought-out minimum, allowing ample opportunity for the learner to experiment and make discoveries.” Every time I encountered a new area I was compelled to look around, not only because the game’s graphics are amazing, but because I was encountering new and exciting areas on a consistent basis. Once you arrive in a new area, you are able to explore to your heart’s content. Each area is also has a corresponding topographic map. The map becomes more detailed as you explore and can be accessed for future reference should you return to the area.

WAR also illustrates what Gee (2003) refers to as the “Explicit Information On-Demand and Just-in-Time Principle,” where the support available to players changes over time. When a newbie begins to play, “tips” appear on the screen the first time different items or events are encountered. Tips only appear at a point when the player can experiment with the information and use it to build upon knowledge at later points in the game. For example, the first time my character encountered a catapult on a battlefield, the game provided a quick tip on how to use the weapon. The information was presented right when I needed it, so I was able to launch enormous boulders at the opposing forces and help the guild annihilate the opposing force’s castle. I would have likely forgotten it had it been introduced all at once during the beginning of the game.

My participation within the guild also illustrated the “Psychosocial Moratorium Principle, where learners can take risks in a space where real-world consequences are lowered (Gee 2003). For example, when new players test new items or tactics, they are likely to have their avatar “killed” in the game. When a character dies, the player is presented with the message “YOU ARE DEAD” and the option to resurrect. Upon resurrection, the player is able to return to the area they perished to try again.

Importantly, characters are never truly destroyed. Instead, they may be resurrected, so the player can return to the same problem with a different approach. For example, my avatar kept getting killed during a trek into an unknown dungeon. My objective was to rid the cave of harpies, but after running around I was unable to find them. Little did I know I had been attracting the harpies from their nests above while running around; it did not take long for them to eat my avatar. To facilitate my learning, the game allowed me to return to the cave until I figured out how to overcome the obstacle. Because consequences are lowered, players are able to jump in and try their hand at new feats without the fear of losing anything of real or imagined value. Death is not a permanent part of the game, allowing players the freedom to experiment and learn from their mistakes.

Reflections on the mini-field study. Teachers, parents, and politicians have railed against games (futilely, I may add), and the literacy events and learning taking place in WAR would generally be dismissed by a school as inadequate or “not real learning.” However, recent scholarship, like that of James Gee, illustrates the positive impact these games can have on a student’s academic performance and opportunities for social connection. After conducting this small study, my argument is that the learning and literacies taking place within these games are far more complex and engaging than traditional schools. The social interactions taking place over programs like Ventrillo, for example, are more engaging and complex than the interactions around and through the print-based texts currently in use in most K-12 schools. My study also shows important links between pleasure and learning. My Field Study paper opened with a quote from Dr. Suess, “*If you never did you should. These things are fun and fun is good.*” Dr. Suess recognized the value of fun, but schools have often perpetuated the myth that “pleasure” and “learning” don’t go together:

Pleasure and learning: For most people these two don’t seem to go together. But that is a mistruth we have picked up at school, where we have been taught that pleasure is fun and learning is work, and, thus, that work is not fun. (Gee, 2005, p. 4)

The value of paying attention to how learning-participation occurs *outside* of schools (in the guild) has the potential to help teachers and scholars rethink how learning is organized *inside* schools. My gaming experience shows how games like WAR not only link fun and learning, but demonstrate important learning principles, such as the *discovery principle*, the *just-in-time principle*, and the *psycho-social moratorium principle*.

Teachers might also try integrating examples from gaming, or games themselves, into the English curriculum. Today, a game such as WAR could be used as inspiration for student writing. Students could create a story about their character and quests or even do technical writing that provides instructions on how the game should be played. Students could be instructed to “speak” Middle English as part of a role play in the game to acclimate them to the language of Shakespeare. If a gamer needed to learn about Germany for school, they could log in to the game and use Ventrillo to communicate with guild-members in Germany. This kind of practice within video games could prepare students for the multimodal and collaborative literacy practices that are increasingly important if today’s adolescents are to participate fully in early 21st century personal, economic, and civic life (New London Group, 1996).

Engagement in new literacies is automatic; we engage in them every day along with our students without thinking about their impact on our learning. This assignment allowed me to explore a love of mine, videogames, through the lens of education and envision classroom uses for new literacy media. This assignment made me aware of things students are capable of outside of school and allowed me to have fun while learning. This assignment also made me more aware of my own learning, which in turn, made me far more aware of the learning students are doing at home. I learned about, and became interested in, new literacies while having fun. This type of learning is what lies at the heart of these games. Pleasure and learning can and do fit.

Revisiting Blogging: Kim’s Self-Study

To meet an elective requirement for my EdD program, I took *New Literacies & 21st Century Schools* in the hopes that it would help me in my role of conducting professional development in technology at my school. The main project for this course asked us to immerse ourselves in a “new literacy” over the span of six weeks and document our experiences, struggles, and successes. I chose to make a return to blogging, a practice I had tried several years previously and subsequently abandoned a month later.

“Web logs” or “Blogs” are websites where people post their ideas, activities, and interests through words, pictures, and video—usually in reverse chronological format. While most early blogs were from “credible sources,” such as journalists or political candidates, they have evolved over time into entries by everyday people about their everyday lives (Beach et al., 2009). Younger participants, in particular, use blogs to keep family and friends updated on daily activities and events (Beach et al., 2009). The blogs with the highest readership tend to be well-written and authored by people who post regularly around a particular topic of interest to a specific audience.

My field study was an opening to give blogging another try. Based on my previous experiences with blogging, I knew that my first hurdle was to find time to blog regularly in order to stay

linked into the community I was trying to learn from and contribute to. Giving myself more leeway than I did in my first attempt at blogging, I figured that a weekly blog was more manageable than expecting myself to publish every day. During my six week experiment, I wrote nine posts on my account in Google's Blogger, eight of which I published.

As a blogger on technology and education, I hoped to join communities of teachers who were trying to integrate technology into their classrooms and consider how schools might prepare students for a changing world. For example, I blogged about the push towards "21st Century Skills" (<http://www.p21.org/>), part of the educational "reform" rhetoric being pushed by big business and politicians. My blog suggested that these notions of "21st century skills" represent a largely traditional curriculum that may have little to do with what students will need to know and be able to do to be considered "literate" in tomorrow's world: (http://www.p21.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=254&Itemid=119). In another of my posts (<http://givenk.blogspot.com/2011/04/21st-century-classroom.html>), I reacted to a YouTube video put together by teachers to model "21st century skills" in their classrooms. The point of my post was that many of the technologies highlighted in the video were not of the Web 2.0 variety, and the video generally did not represent students engaging in critical thinking, discussion, or reflection, much less authoring their own information for a broader audience.

My self-study project also incorporated additional tools that could support blogging and learning, such as *Goodreads*, *Twitter*, and *Diigo*. Goodreads is a social networking site designed to connect readers to book reviews, recommendations, and discussions with other participants around literature. I was able to combine my "worlds" of Blogger and Goodreads through features which automatically posted what I was reading on Goodreads to the "bookshelf" in my Blogger sidebar. Similarly, Twitter leveraged my participation in my professional learning network by providing me great ideas for writing and ways to "advertise" my posts to my professional learning network. Diigo, a social bookmarking application, was another way I could expand my learning and sharing by posting annotated bookmarks that allowed others to see webpages related to our shared interests.

My return to blogging seemed to have mixed results as far as me reaching an audience or linking my blog to communities of committed educators. It was pretty discouraging at first to have only two followers to my blog. Then I found the "page views" statistics on Blogger. From mid-April through the beginning of June, I had 196 page views - 140 of which were on my entry about "internet memes" demonstrating that a name is indeed everything - at least in terms of keyword searches and hits. I was surprised that even today, people were reading (or at least loading) entries I had written several months ago. Overall, I've had 935 page views (one from Latvia!). This seemed like a stronger indicator that I was entering and contributing to a community of educators with interests in technology.

A shift in mindset: Blogging from a social perspective. My field study offered an opportunity to look at Web 2.0 tools from a social perspective that was new to me. This was my first course in language and literacy. Through course readings, we learned how the growing influence of a sociocultural perspective since the 1980s has impacted many theorists and educators to think about literacy as bound by social contexts. A sociocultural perspective assumes that meaning,

participation, and a sense of community are mediated through the cultural contexts of the participants—in turn, participants also are influenced by the use of the tools and participation in the community.

These views helped me consider how blogging was indeed a social practice with its own rules to engage in the life of particular communities. The community of bloggers I engaged with was focused on thoughtful conversations and adding value to teaching and learning. The blogs I read included topics such as school reform, standardized testing, equity of services, and meeting the needs of specific student populations. If I wanted to be considered a part of this community, I needed to make sure that I read carefully, commented thoughtfully, and provided resources and insight that might help others reflect on their educational practice.

Across the study, I became more adept at building and participating in various communities through my blogging. Many interactions with my online community were through tweets rather than blog comments or subscribers. Instead of traditional personal writing, my blogging felt more like an online social networking experience once my community grew to 150 people I “follow,” and I collected 50 of my own followers. More and more people outside of my “physical” realm served as both contributors and learners within my growing network, and I began to see more people connect with content through the different online tools I was using. A major turning point in my understanding of blogging, micro-blogging, and the larger online community took place when my focus shifted from the number of posts that I made to participating more fully in the blogosphere.

Finally, the seminar, course readings, and field study helped me shift my mindset towards new literacies from the mindset of Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Lankshear and Knobel (2006) define two different “mindsets” towards new literacies. Mindset 1, synonymous with Web 1.0, is primarily focused on viewing our current world as the same as it has historically been—only with technology added into the mix: the mindset is to accomplish traditional tasks with more technological tools. In contrast, Mindset 2/Web 2.0 sees the world as fundamentally different due to the new technologies that are more interactive, social, community minded, and user centric. The social view emphasizes that the specific tool or “technical stuff” used is not as important as the mindset or “ethos stuff” of how it is used (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Whether students use paper and pencil or PowerPoint to create a story does not change the essential nature of the task—the writing of stories has been a central literacy practice of schooling for a century. In contrast, using wikis or social media to collaborate and share ideas interactively with a broader audience leverages technological tools in a way that better approaches the “ethos” of “new literacies” and Web 2.0.

Lankshear & Knobel’s (2006) discussions of different “mindsets” towards new literacies helped me to reconsider my focus on the “technical stuff” vs. the “ethos stuff.” I began my self study by treating blogging as a technological online journal – a new way to accomplish a traditional task. Lankshear and Knobel refer to this as “old practice dressed up in digital drag” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p. 81). As I continued my self-study and tried to understand the norms of the blogging community, however, I began to shift more toward Mindset 2/Web 2.0 to consider how new literacies shaped and were shaped by new norms of social interaction and participation in a

community of educators.

Reflections on the mini-field study. Importantly, this self-study facilitated new connections with scholars I admire and teachers with a similar passion for teaching and learning. I have expanded my capacity for learning, growth, and change, and I am contributing to an online community of educators that has exposed me to a variety of ideas related to our current system of education. My conversations with my cyber community have also “leaked into” my work with my own “concrete” colleagues at my school as I reflect and puzzle on new ideas and possible solutions to issues related to student engagement, effective uses of new practices, and ways to leverage new literacies in the traditional classroom setting.

The combination of course readings and immersion in the blogosphere also helped me to connect theory and practice. Books by Gee (2004), Lankshear and Knobel (2006), and Beach et al (2009) were at first outside my practical understandings of using technology, both personally and educationally. In my previous experiences learning and teaching others to integrate technology, my focus was on the “technical stuff” of new tools and how to use them. Through my self-study, however, I both participated in blogging and observed the blogosphere enough to begin to develop a more situated understanding of new literacies and sociocultural research and theory. At the same time, these course readings supported my efforts to recognize the “ethos stuff” of new literacies and better understand the ways in which bloggers created and participated in communities through this particular “tool.”

My qualitative self-study not only lent itself to a more situated understanding of new literacies, but a means to rethink how I might approach professional development in technology for other teachers in my school district. As I work with other teachers, I feel it will be more important to emphasize the ways in which the tools enhance and mediate learning, communication, and a sense of a larger community—rather than only explaining how to use the tools and integrate them into classrooms. This will open up opportunities for me to support teachers in using tools such as blogging, online simulations, and gaming in ways that might enable students to produce knowledge within communities of practice.

This project has given me a better idea of how to engage my own students with new literacies. It would be a mistake to assume that because many of my students engage regularly with Web 2.0 technologies at home, they understand and have reflected on how the use of these tools leverages their learning in significant ways. Since I have immersed myself in blogging and studied my experiences, I can now anticipate some of the struggles middle schoolers may have using different tools and developing habits of mind to become reflective Web 2.0 community scholars. Additionally, as teachers, we are often looking for more “authentic” audiences for which our students can publish their work. Blogs and other Web 2.0 tools can offer a viable solution to this problem and create the opportunity to demonstrate appropriate academic uses of these spaces.

The project also offered me a more engaging experience with new literacies, sociocultural theory, and academic reading. In previous graduate work, my assignments mainly focused on readings from educational theorists and reflecting on them through class discussion and writing. While those seminars have served me well, as a practicing teacher, I recognize how learning is deeper and more meaningful when students are given the opportunity to interact with content in a

variety of ways (Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2004). While all members of the class read the same theoretical books and articles, the course offered us a choice of inquiry topics and created space in class for us to share our experiences in the context of discussing academic readings. For me, the structure of the class and project helped me to alter my mindset to understand better the social aspects of new literacies and to recognize links between theory and practice.

Discussion: Qualitative Self-Study and New Literacies

Many teacher education programs have yet to wrestle with the implications of “new” literacies for schools and society (Larson & Marsh, 2005). In this article, we explored a small effort in two master’s courses to introduce educators to sociocultural perspectives and new literacies through small-scale qualitative studies. These course projects were far from ideal. They took place in isolated courses that were not aligned with other literacy courses, met for only 7-10 weeks, and provided teachers with minimal guidance and support to attempt qualitative research for the first time. In spite of these major limitations, however, Bryan and Kim are two of many teachers whose brief engagements with sociocultural theories and qualitative research offered them legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in practices of sociocultural research and communities of educators influenced by the new literacy studies and studies of new literacies. Although this is not a systematic study of our learning and teaching in these courses, we hope that teacher educators might consider the potential benefits and limits of qualitative self-studies based on our different vantage points as teachers, graduate students, and teacher educators.

We see these qualitative self-studies as small but positive steps towards more extensive engagements with new literacies in teacher education. These qualitative studies helped apprentice Bryan and Kim (and other teachers) into basic practices of sociocultural research and communities of gamers and teachers who largely interact through new literacies and web 2.0 technologies. Sociocultural perspectives were completely new for them, but their narratives illustrate how they began to approach literacy and learning from a sociocultural perspective. Bryan’s study documented how different literacy practices in WAR were connected to social norms related to gaming, war craft, and popular culture. Kim acknowledged how she began her study from the web 1.0 mindset that is typical of K-12 schools, but she began to shift across the quarter towards a more sociocultural view of blogging as a means of building and participating in communities of like-minded educators—not simply posting personal journal entries on-line.

The blending of seminar discussions and qualitative inquiry also seemed to help them bridge perceived divides between educational theory and practice. For Bryan, participating in on-line gaming and documenting his literacy and learning led to a more situated understanding of sociocultural theories and the scholarship of James Gee (2005). Conversely, Gee’s (2005) writing provided him different ways to think about norms of gaming, literacy, and learning that he would not have recognized without course readings and seminar discussions. Similarly, Kim wrote that the course did not introduce an academic theory out of context and then ask her to apply it, but to understand and use theories of new literacies in the context of her participation in the blogosphere. To put this in sociocultural terms, the course helped acculturate them into online communities and graduate seminars that provided contexts for more *situated* understanding of the social practices new literacies, sociocultural theorizing, and qualitative research.

Bryan and Kim also described these courses as making educational research seem more real and relevant to them as teachers. Bryan had read very little educational scholarship prior to the course, and his teacher education program had not promoted teacher inquiry. Through this project, however, he was highly engaged in studying and writing about on-line gaming as a site of productive literacy and learning, and he also sought out academic books beyond course texts to help him make sense of new literacies, on-line gaming, and the limitations of traditional schooling. Kim was not working towards an EdD to become an educational researcher, but to grow as a classroom teacher-leader. For the most part, her school district and EdD program did not question top-down practices of research-based “reforms” where teachers were mandated by school administrators to implement research-based practices with little sense of the research that presumably legitimated such approaches. For her, qualitative self-study offered her “a closer connection to research” and a different professional role where she might conduct valid research that could positively impact practice. In her words, qualitative research provided systematic ways for educators and researchers to study relevant issues and practices of everyday life *in context*, which was potentially much more valid than research conducted in a lab or experimental setting.

Finally, the focus on reading, discussing, and conducting qualitative literacy research did not preclude them from considering the classroom implications of sociocultural research and new literacies. Quite the opposite, they agreed, “sociocultural theories helped us to connect to the classroom rather than remove us from it.” Even though the master’s course did not emphasize classroom implications of new literacies, Bryan came away from his field with many ideas to integrate aspects of gaming into high school English classrooms. Kim not only came away with classroom ideas for her middle school students, but a different sense of how she might approach educational technology with in-service teachers in her professional development roles in her school district.

Conclusion

K-12 schools and university-based teacher education programs generally provide few institutional supports for teachers to approach literacy as social practice (Myers, 2006) or explore the literate landscapes that today’s youth engage and create when they are not sitting in classrooms (Vasudeven, 2007). This article considered how two teachers took steps towards conceiving of literacy as social practice and taking up the kinds of on-line literacies and identities that now permeate many spheres of popular culture and many people’s social, economic, and civic lives (New London Group, 1996). Our narratives and reflections suggest that conducting qualitative self-studies may equip beginning and experienced teachers to take up sociocultural perspectives, make theory-practice connections, acquire more situated understandings of new literacies and educational research, and develop alternative approaches to new literacies in K-12 classrooms. We hope that our research vignettes and reflections may spark teacher educators in universities and K-12 schools to explore qualitative studies of youths’ literacies and qualitative self-studies of new literacies as ways to make the new literacy studies and new literacies more accessible and tangible to practicing teachers.

Footnotes

¹ Barton & Hamilton's six propositions about literacy as social practice:

- Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts
- There are different literacies associated with different domains of life.
- Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others.
- Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices.
- Literacy is historically situated.
- Literacy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense-making. (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p.8)

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