

FEATURE

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Starting

ESSENTIAL LITERACY

Requires a Focus on
Literacy Practices in
a Local Context

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School viewed David as a struggling reader. By seventh grade David's schooling history included numerous elementary school reading interventions, a learning disorder diagnosis, below-average performance on standardized state reading assessments, and required enrollment in an additional reading course. Each day David spent a ninety-minute class period in a reading intervention class predominantly comprised of African American students like him. Filled with leveled books, young adult literature, and magazines, one corner of this classroom provided a space for silent sustained reading. In another corner students logged onto a computer program with the hope it would improve their vocabulary and reading comprehension. At a third station in the center of the room David's teacher offered mini-lessons on improving the clarity of student blog posts about their independent reading books. The school librarian frequently visited the class to give book talks on recently acquired YA literature titles. Teachers in his other classes used the same set of agreed-upon content-area reading strategies to support David's comprehension of traditional print texts.

While not diminishing the necessity of David improving his reading of traditional texts, I encourage you to consider what preconceived assumptions about literacy guided the identification of David as a struggling reader needing these interventions. If we desire to support how students develop a critical stance towards texts, we need to expand our view of literacy. The privileging of certain kinds of literacy "creates a fundamental unfairness" for students who have

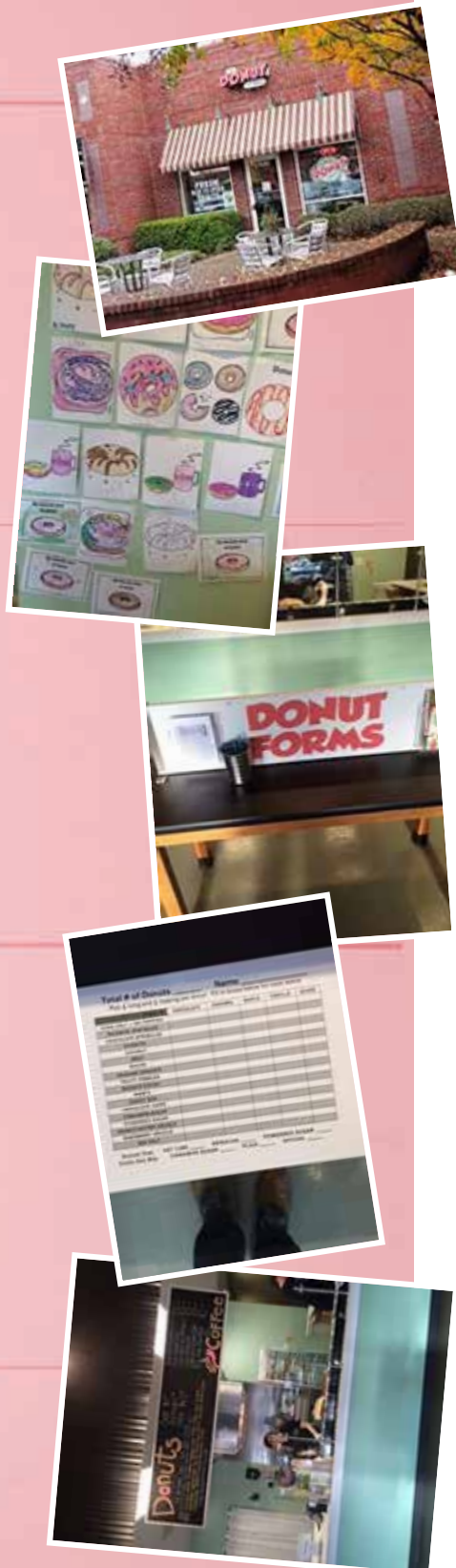
rich literacy practices not always recognized by schools (Gee 2014, 10). Our definition of literacy has implications for students.

New Literacies or Varied Literacy Practices?

A cursory exploration of the last two years of *Knowledge Quest* reveals no shortage of discussion on different types of literacy (e.g., reading literacy, information literacy and research skills, online literacy and digital citizenship, visual literacy, financial literacy, digital literacy, traditional literacy, source literacy, data literacy, disciplinary information literacy, global literacy). This proliferation of literacies complicates collaborative efforts between school librarians and teachers who see a multitude of interrelated yet divergent literacy goals.

Do new technologies create different ways of reading, writing, and communicating, or are these merely tools for new literacy practices with technologies destined to be viewed the same way we now remember the green-screened Apple IIE? If one of the graphic artists who produce the Google Doodles displayed daily on Google's homepage struggles to adhere to a budget, is she *visually* literate but *financially* illiterate? When a relative newcomer to South Carolina concludes "Bless Your Heart" is a sincere expression of sympathy—and not a condescending pat on the head—is this misunderstanding a reflection of his *cultural* literacy? If so, where does the [insert term] + literacy formula end?

Tasha Bergson-Michelson and Jole Seroff likely spoke for many librarians when they stated: "It can be dizzying to consider the array of literacies and try to understand how they fit productively into our



own school library programs... how is a school librarian to get anything done?" (2016, 6–7). As a fellow educator who recognizes the critical role of librarians and the too few conversations among literacy researchers and librarians, in this article I present a unifying conception of literacy, a conception to buttress our collaborative efforts to support all students. The first section uses the experiences of David (pseudonym), a thirteen-year-old African American friend of mine, to call for viewing literacy as social and cultural practice. David's use of texts as tools and his navigation of language demands ultimately allow him to participate in literate activity in multiple contexts. The final section turns attention to two principles librarians can employ to support adolescent literacy. While the case study focuses on an adolescent, the principles are applicable to younger children and adults and presented with the hope our collective efforts support empowering literacy for all.

David's Literacy at the Donut Experiment

Walking into the newly opened Donut Experiment, David immediately grabbed a form, surveyed the possibilities, and checked off his caramel glaze with powdered sugar. It was our first visit to the newly opened donut shop where customizing your donut drew large crowds of teenagers. When my selection lagged, David joked, "Maybe, if they had an app, you could've ordered ahead of time." He walked up to the counter, surveyed the donut assembly line, and waited for a woman to walk over before asking, "Hey, cool place. How long have you been open?" By the time I chose my maple

glaze and sea salt, and joined him at the counter, David had inquired into what is typically done with the unused donuts, the capacity of the large oven, and whether he could pay with his Apple Pay. Succumbing to David's smooth talking, the middle-aged woman behind the counter had already broken norms and given him a sample of a maple-glazed donut with bacon. This is David; he's quite the smooth talker. What does it mean to be literate at this Donut Experiment? What texts are used to participate in activities here? What are the rules for communicating here? In other words, was David literate in this context?


Most people may not recognize the literate practices at a donut shop, but as Elizabeth Birr Moje argued, "Literacy practice is always domain specific in the sense that all literacy is enacted in a *specific* context, for a *specific* purpose, and to or with a *specific* audience" (2015, 256). Within this donut shop, customers and employees used texts (donut ordering forms, signs, chalkboard menu, Apple credit card scanner, children's colorings, etc.) to participate in shared activities. But, as David demonstrated, engaging and participating in the activities at the Donut Experiment required an understanding of how to read and write in acceptable ways with local texts and how to engage in acceptable language. After all, acceptable language would be vastly different if the Donut Experiment were located next to Liebman's Kosher Delicatessen and Catering on 235th Street in the Bronx or Yoder's Kitchen on Columbia Street in the rural Amish community of Arthur, Illinois, instead of in Greenville, South Carolina. Not only did David quickly use and interpret texts in socially acceptable ways, but growing

up in the South, David knew how to approach the older white female employee with polite talk (and not the gruff direct language we might encounter in the Bronx) to get the information (and a free maple-glazed donut with bacon) he really wanted.

Literacy as Social and Cultural Practice

Beginning in the 1980s, numerous influential literacy research studies documented how literacy is a product of social, cultural, and historical contexts. Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole (1981) used the daily writing of the Vai people to demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and technology of literacy. Brian V. Street (1984) demonstrated multiple literacies in an Iranian village in multiple contexts (school literacies, religious literacy in Koranic study centers, market literacy, etc.). Shirley Brice Heath (1983) showed how three local communities used differing "ways with words" to socialize children into unique literacy and language practices. David Barton and Mary E. Hamilton (1986) provided a detailed study of the role of literacy in the everyday lives of people in Lancaster, England. In each study, literacy researchers determined literacy cannot be separated from the "particular forms of social activity" used to make meaning or the cultural context in which they occur (Prinsloo and Baynham 2008, 2).

Obviously, David's literacy extends far beyond the Donut Experiment, and he is socialized into acceptable participation. When posting on Facebook an image of himself and his new girlfriend at a party, how do the previous reactions of Facebook friends influence David's authorship decisions? How do the number of likes and comments on his previous



posts and the posts of others who announce new relationships tell him when and how to announce his new relationship? The more he participates, the more his learning of these acceptable practices is scaffolded through conversations and interactions with others (Vygotsky 1978). And, David's eventual post isn't his own because making an "utterance" (or even a Facebook relationship status update) is to appropriate the words of others and populate them with his own intention (Bakhtin 1981). At the Donut Experiment or on Facebook, David's literacy is a social practice.

Cultural practice also applies in other contexts for which participation involves awareness of varying culturally acceptable norms. Whether David attends a local church, a synagogue, or a mosque, activity at each place of worship depends upon varied cultural norms. Pierre Bourdieu argued language use depends on the historical, social, and cultural context in which it is used (1983). What counts as religious texts at a synagogue in Greenville, South Carolina, in 2017 and how do they differ from the religious texts used at an African American church in Greenville, South Carolina, in 2017? In 1886? Is David expected to recite or analyze scripture? When and how is David expected (or allowed) to speak at the synagogue or the church? Proper greeting, acceptable language, and use of texts

define what it means to be literate in these houses of worship. As a result, literacy is much more than the simple ability to read and/or write words (Gee 2014, 61).

Supporting Adolescent Literacy within Schools

David's literacy practices in multiple contexts suggest supporting student literacy begins by broadening our concept (or definition) of literacy in school. Each school discipline has acceptable ways of using texts and language during activities to produce knowledge. Reading and writing and reasoning in disciplines becomes more specialized as students progress through schooling (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008). Within the sciences, students should be apprenticed into norms for making claims about the world, for designing a process of investigating, for collecting rich evidence, and for reasoning with the evidence to prove or disprove an original hypothesis. Within mathematics, teachers should guide students through using problems and data (texts) alongside mathematical practices to justify and explain problem solving. Within history, students need teachers who scaffold how to critically examine primary

sources, how to contextualize the source within a historical period, and how to leverage evidence towards the creation of a historical argument. Moje (2015) argued learning in these disciplines represents cultural work as each discipline is a culture with norms for literacy and participation. Our goal as educators, then, is to help students navigate these varied disciplines and develop an understanding of literacy practices in social contexts, whether at the Donut Experiment, on social media, in a house of worship, or in a classroom. Students need teachers and school librarians who are committed to helping them understand how different texts and talk support knowledge creation and participation in different circumstances. Navigating with understanding, then, is to be literate.

What is the role of school librarians in supporting how students navigate literacy practices? In his study of the literacy practices in three libraries, Mark Dressman (1997) found vastly different literacy

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opportunities as each library was connected to its community culture and presented varied opportunities to read and write. What literacy practices are valued in the libraries David enters? How are these literacy practices aligned with a shared view of literacy for students in schools and classrooms? What the library space offers is part of the support; I want to briefly outline two key practices school librarians can use with teachers to support adolescent literacy in the library and the classroom.

Exploration of Critical Local Issues

Adolescent literacy occurs within the context of inquiry that matters—to students and to communities. As Paulo Freire stated, “Reading is a matter of studying reality that is alive, reality that we are living inside of, reality as history being made and also making us” (1985, 18). To support student liberation and their critical consciousness of the social realities around them, school

librarians and teachers must frame disciplinary learning with a local lens, exploring critical local issues. In chemistry classes students and teachers can explore solutions to the increased prevalence of type II diabetes, and examine the impacts of processed foods and sugar on the health of marginalized and lower-income community members who do not always have access to healthy food choices. In math or statistics courses students and teachers can seek solutions to the challenges of living on a minimum-wage job in their community and the likelihood of minimum-wage earners eventually owning their own homes. Sarah Jane Levin (2016) demonstrated how critical civic literacy can be developed when students inquire into rigorous critical service-learning related to local social issues. School librarians should ask themselves: How might we support students’ exploration of the world around them? How might we partner with a classroom teacher to frame disciplinary units and content around critical issues in the local community?

School librarians and teachers in the disciplines must collaborate to develop curricular projects and pool resources related to critical issues of empowerment in communities. Librarians can be a liaison between the community issues and the classroom teacher, bridging the lives of students with the classroom. What resources and people might a student need a librarian to share with an ELA teacher planning an investigation into gender stereotypes and local depictions of youth in the community? What resources and people might a student need a librarian to share with a mathematics teacher planning an investigation into the economic feasibility of the local adoption of a living minimum wage in the community? Providing access to diverse resources is not enough. Students need school librarians to provide access to resources related to critical issues of empowerment and to help teachers in the disciplines frame inquiry with these issues.

Texts as Tools for Literate Thinking

Roni Jo Draper and Daniel Siebert defined text as “any representational resource or object that people intentionally imbue with meaning” (2010, 28). We can support students’ literacy by using a broadened definition of what counts as text, recognizing the affordance and challenges of using each. When David enters Mrs. Dumas’s seventh-grade geography class and explores limited local environmental sustainability efforts, he can use nontraditional texts as tools for literate thinking. Stemming from student concerns about the lack of recycling and sustainable environmental efforts in their community, to investigate and develop an argument to present to the city council students can use a copy of a proposed city council resolution, interviews with community members and city council members, a public-engagement video from a local environmental advocacy group, and a copy of the existing EPA law. For each of these texts, students need support in using texts for discipline-specific purposes and in understanding how to leverage

evidence from texts to problem-solve a solution.

Each text has differing affordances or aspects making the text easier for students. These affordances could be alignment with a student’s background knowledge or experiences, familiarity with a genre, familiarity with the topic, the writing style in the text, or the mode of the text. Yet, each also offers bottlenecks or predictable places where students can get stuck in their thinking. How can educators, including librarians, help students critically navigate a multitude of text types and to see the affordances and complexities of texts?

First, students need school librarians to help teachers decide which texts are appropriate for students to read in their classes. Texts should provide contrasting perspectives on issues so students use the texts to construct discipline-appropriate arguments. Librarians can respond to the needs of David and other students by encouraging teachers to use a wide array of texts, including multimodal texts that mirror those used in disciplines: primary sources in social studies; charts, graphs, and tables in

science; visuals, word problems, and graphs in mathematics.

Secondly, students need school librarians to engage teachers in considering how each text might be familiar or complex to students. Librarians can take the lead in these discussions by offering professional development workshops for teachers on the challenges of using different text types. A school librarian could visit Mrs. Dumas’s classroom to explain how each text being used by David and his peers presents challenges. Not only can libraries be physical spaces where diverse texts are used by students, school librarians also can support teachers’ understanding of how to use texts in the classroom.

Beyond Traditional Reading Interventions

The literacy offered to David in his reading intervention class is not enough and minimizes the wide-ranging literacy practices in which he participates daily. To empower adolescents—in classrooms, libraries, and community spaces—David needs librarians who are able to view

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literacy as a practice where participation depends on understanding of how to use texts and language. But, he also needs librarians who actively advocate for a wide array of diverse texts and who use conversations and activities to engage teachers in understanding the affordances and complexities of different texts. For students to use texts as tools to read the world around them and for learning in academic disciplines, teachers and librarians must first understand how different types of texts can both support and challenge students.

Finally, for David and any student, the use of texts as tools for literate participation rests upon the value of the inquiry in the first place. Students need classrooms and libraries where they investigate critical issues that matter to them and that result in heightened critical consciousness in communities. David will improve his literate practices (even in classrooms) when we support his ability to navigate literacy participation and we marry it with issues that matter. This vision of empowering literacy for students necessitates our collective efforts.



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2017 article "Reframing Literacy Coaching as Collaborative Inquiry in Secondary School Disciplines" published in the February issue of *English Leadership Quarterly*, and with Danielle Herro coauthored the 2016 article "Lessons Learned: Collaborative Symbiosis and Responsive Disciplinary Literacy Teaching" in the March/April issue of *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* and the chapter "Supporting Inquiry with Digital Texts in School Disciplines" in the book *Using Technology to Enhance Reading: Innovative Approaches to Literacy Instruction* (Solution Tree 2015).

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