

Sandra F. Matson

# Walking Together Into a Third Space: Using Family Literacy Projects to Learn More About Students' Paths



## Abstract

As a teacher of struggling and resistant readers in high school, I searched for instructional practices that provided relevance, motivation, and engagement for my students as well as presented opportunities to become more aware of their challenges and priorities outside of school. Technology needed to be a part of the project to allow students opportunities to use 21<sup>st</sup> century skills while learning to use media unfamiliar to them. Described in this article is how this seemingly simple project became a window into students' worlds outside of school and allowed insight into the degree of influence those lives outside of school can have on students' academic performance. This assignment provides educators a flexible tool to learn more about the lives of our students that, without this project, we may never learn.

*Keywords:* literacy, third space, technology, motivation, engagement

**Sandra F. Matson** currently teaches reading intervention and English language arts classes at Cedar Creek High School in Bastrop ISD. Her research interests include increasing relevance and engagement for secondary students, especially those struggling with literacy, by examining classroom practices to ensure educators teach to every student. She currently is enrolled in the doctoral program in School Improvement at Texas State University. She can be reached at [sm1249@txstate.edu](mailto:sm1249@txstate.edu).

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The most valuable lessons I have learned have always come from my students. They have taught me far more than I have taught them, often by sharing their lives. After completing a personal literacy project in one of my graduate courses, I decided to incorporate a family literacy project with a group of my secondary reading students in order to give them an opportunity to share the paths of their lives and their literacies.

In the family literacy project, I asked my students to document the literacy activities they and their families engaged in over a one-week period. Students were asked to take photographs,

record audio, make notes, etc., in order to document a variety of activities. Once they had documented their literacies, students were to create a digital multimedia presentation to share their literacy activities with the class and to make connections between their literacy practices and the literacies that school demands.

One of the goals of the family literacy project was to create a third space for my students, as described by Moje et al. (2004). *Third space* is a space that is created when the formal space of school (or another institution) comes together with the less formal space of home and community. These spaces can include language, literacy practices, cultural and personal belief systems, and social practices. Moje et al. (2004) argue that third space provides a useful resource for students in their attempt to understand the world in the context of, and connections between, their home and classroom.

My students were required to take my reading class because they experienced challenges with their reading; as a result of their reading difficulties, many also struggled in their content area courses. For them, school was often a strange and uncomfortable place. My aim was to incorporate instructional practices that engaged my students as well as allowed them opportunities to use their own literacy strengths, including 21<sup>st</sup> century technology, by introducing a third space that recognized their strengths and proficiencies, even in a formal school context.

### Defining Literacy

As I planned to introduce the family literacy project in my classroom, I found I needed to pre-teach the concept of literacy, as my students were unable to offer even a simple definition of the word. Intrigued by the idea of teaching literacy, I reviewed how various social, cultural, and ethnic groups used literacy in their lives and what it meant to them (Barton & Hamilton, 1998).

Alternative forms of text and literacy practices fill my students' lives, such as billboards, signs, newspapers, magazines, video games, text messaging, and more (Nichols, Walker, & McIntyre, 2009). In introducing the concept of literacy, I began by modeling my photos of literacy that I encountered during a 48-hour period at home, in my community, and at school. The students began to notice that all literacies "looked like something that could be learned." However, they were still missing the more subtle literacy acts such as behavioral expectations in different situations or the interpretation of symbolic meaning, such as thinking of patriotism when seeing the U.S. flag.

To scaffold their deeper understanding, I took the students on a literacy field trip and instructed them to point out different items associated with literacy. Walking together, we exited the classroom and a student pointed to the digital clock on the wall. "Is that literacy?" I asked the other students.

L.G.: "Well, you have to know what the numbers mean."

B.R.: "And you have to understand what time even is, right, Miss?"

Me: "What do you mean by time?"

B.R.: "You know, what time of day it is."

Me: "What is our system of time?"

S.T.: "Yea, there are 24 hours in a day, and you would have to know what that means."

No one could identify military time, not being familiar with that system. As we walked around the school the students pointed out the more obvious things, including signs and directional symbols such as arrows. We walked outside the building and the students hesitated. As I looked around, I noticed an orange traffic cone with tape, the American flag, a message on a sign with dates, cars with license plates, and a school bell ringing. I hoped the students would recognize these as literacy indicators. One student pointed to the orange traffic cone and asked, "Would this be a literacy?" I presented the question to the group.

G.T.: "You have to know what it means, right?"

Me: "What does it mean and how would it affect your behavior?"

G.T.: "Well, you know you aren't supposed to go past it."

When asked how they knew that, they said they could not remember but that someone must have taught them. They eventually recognized the other symbols and rich discussions ensued regarding how they represented literacy and what they knew about the meaning of symbols such as the American flag.

I was still not convinced that a couple of the students had grasped the concept as we re-entered the building. It was important they did, as the next assignment would involve them keeping a diary (written or digital) of literacies they encountered in their homes and communities on a daily basis. Suddenly, one of the students of concern stopped.

S.G.: "Miss! The lockers!"

Me: "What about them?"

S.G.: "The numbers on them. You have to understand and recognize them to find your locker."

I nodded, encouraging him to continue.

S.G.: "Then you have to understand how to open the lock by remembering the combination!"

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Everyone agreed. The other student of concern ran across the hall and pointed to a box on the wall that housed the fire alarm.

P.B.: “You know the fire alarms are red and that these are what you pull if there is a fire!”

Everyone agreed and without prompting from me, began talking about how they knew that. The students began constructing their own learning and as a group, began applying the concept. I stood on the perimeter of the group and continued taking notes as the students excitedly pointed to objects and discussed how these represented literacies.

### **Implementing the Family Literacy Project**

The project consisted of three weeks of collecting data and preparing the presentation. First, I explained to the students the assignment, which required that the students keep a digital or written diary of literacies around them at home and in their communities. They were then to compile the notes into a digital multimedia presentation of their choice, with explanations about the literacy representations.

Prior to starting the diaries, I sent a letter home to each student’s parents or guardians explaining the project and requirements in order to avoid any misunderstanding regarding the students’ use of cameras and cell phones. Part of the assignment included having the letter signed and returning it. To invite any questions or further discussion, I provided my phone number. If parents presented concerns regarding images of family members, students were encouraged to blur the image or use symbols.

During the next class meeting, we met in small groups and made plans for the diaries. In later class meetings, we met in the media center, and students reviewed the multimedia presentation choices and decided which one they preferred to use. A few days later during a class meeting, I provided time to discuss the structure of the presentations, such as the introduction, body, and conclusion, as well as elements that could be used to make their presentation more interactive, such as photos, graphics, videos, and sound. I modeled writing an introduction, and the students practiced writing their introductions in small groups.

The students spent the last five days of the project in the computer lab creating their presentations using digital cameras, cell phone cameras, and digital music recorders. Some students chose to use Microsoft Office PowerPoint, others Windows Movie Maker, and one student decided to use a Prezi ([www.prezi.com](http://www.prezi.com)) for her final product. The students maintained high levels of engagement throughout the project. Although I provided instruction and modeling initially, the students worked independently by the final week, and when needing assistance, they consulted each other. I remained at a distance until time for the presentations. Each student received a rubric for assessing the presentation.

The presentations offered me a window into my students’ lives outside my classroom. I developed a deeper understanding of their challenges as well as the various literacy skills they possess.

During each student’s presentation, all other students were expected to complete a rubric and write positive comments on the bottom of the page so they could be clipped and provided to the presenter confidentially. Some presentations surprised students in what they learned about the lives of their peers. One male student shared a presentation featuring all the literacies encountered by his two-year-old son. Another student featured family members and the literacies they encountered in their jobs outside the home, such as the construction work shared with his father. He explained the measuring required as well as the knowledge of power tools. Another student worked in the family’s restaurant and this often included using the cash register, handling money, and taking meal orders of customers.

The presentations offered me a window into my students’ lives outside my classroom. I developed a deeper understanding of their challenges as well as the various literacy skills they possess. Their work provided opportunities to ask questions about professions, customs, and members of the families. Several students proudly answered questions about cultural practices featured in their presentations. The most compelling result presented itself a few weeks later when the student who had created a Prezi came to my classroom one morning before school. She excitedly reported that her mother had observed her working on her project one evening and asked her to show her how to use the Prezi. My student reported that her mother had delivered a presentation at her place of employment using a Prezi and had received a job promotion.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

I am convinced more than ever that our students have much more to teach us and their families when we provide them with the tools and opportunities to bridge their two worlds to create a third space. As I reflect on the presentations, I realize the information I gleaned from my students and their worlds—including their use of technology, their excitement with the assignment, and their home lives—will influence future lesson plans and instructional decisions as I strive to create that third space in my classroom.

Barton and Hamilton (1998) discuss the different literacies such as those that would involve media or symbols, but perhaps most importantly when considering third spaces, one must consider the different literacies, created by cultural domains. The literacies would include literacy practices and

beliefs that are exclusive to a particular culture and community (if one is to think of community as neighborhood) (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). My false assumption that my students possessed the same understanding as I do of the literacy related to the American flag illustrates the need for deeper understanding of our students' literacy domains. Many of my students were immigrants to the United States, and their cultural literacies involving flags centered more on the flags of their home countries. In addition, students who did not attend elementary school in the United States may not have acquired the knowledge and literacy practices I take for granted regarding the symbolic nature of the American flag.

Through the family literacy project, I also learned about activities my students viewed as important in their lives. It surprised me that few of the final products contained gadgets such as video games or digital music players. My prediction had been that these objects held positions of high priority for high school students; however, when student did mention them in their presentations, it was in passing and secondary to what they deemed important in their worlds of literacy. Students demonstrated priorities such as family and family activities (including cooking, cleaning, and jobs inside and outside the home). Students did not appear hesitant to share their roles in family financial support; likewise, very few presentations included recreational activities other than extracurricular school activities, such as dance classes. I wondered: Did they think their recreational activities do not represent literacy, or do they not participate in many recreational activities outside of school?

The successful creation of a third space must be preceded by trust; students are vulnerable when asked to share personal information. When I introduced this lesson to the students, several reported that their parents had questions regarding the assignment. I naively thought their main concern might be about securing access to technology, but later I realized it may have had more to do with privacy issues. At this point, I revised the assignment, and we discussed how photos could be taken to maintain anonymity or that photos could represent activities rather than more personal moments. In future project assignments, I believe explicit discussions of safety and purpose should be included to help alleviate some of the privacy concerns.

I also believe I need to extend this assignment to broaden the scope of information gathering. I believed initially that the assignment would create a third space; now I know that it merely serves as an introduction, and much more is required to create a full third space in my classroom. The next step must include the creation of a safe place in which students feel comfortable discussing and illustrating the informal space of home, community, and social practice. We have walked into our third space, but we have much further to go.

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