

Practitioner research and literacy studies: Toward more dialogic methodologies

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the potential of practitioner research to contribute to understandings of critical and transformative literacy theories. Drawing upon the work of intellectual historian Dominick LaCapra (2004), we investigate how practitioner research can reconcile theories proliferated from universities with those generated by practitioners, who e literacy from their work with students in classrooms and communities. Following a review of scholarship by literacy teachers, we examine examples of practitioner inquiry conducted in a graduate literacy course to discuss the following: What happens when school- and community-based practitioners are in dialogue with academic literature in the field of literacy? How can practitioner research encourage educators to develop their own working theories of literacy practice? And what can the broader field of literacy learn from activist practitioner researchers? In conclusion, we suggest several interconnected ways that practitioner research methodologies can inform more dialectical understandings of literacy practice and theory.

KEYWORDS: Collaborative inquiry, critical literacy, literacy theory, multiliteracies. New Literacy Studies, practitioner research, teacher research.

“If Aristotle had cooked, much more would he have written.” *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (1692/2012)

University-based literacy researchers have developed generative frameworks that have been important resources to think about teaching and learning more expansively. Our own scholarship has been influenced by understandings of literacy as multiple and multimodal, shaped by social, political and cultural dynamics (Gee, 1999; Kress, 2003; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1995). Yet as former elementary, secondary, ELL and adult literacy teachers who have been involved in communities of inquiry, we remain concerned about what we perceive to be a disconnect between the theories proliferated from universities, and what we regard as the no-less rich perspectives generated by practitioners who conceptualise literacy from the locations of diverse classrooms and communities.

An alternative intellectual genealogy would suggest that many practitioners have developed their own conceptual understandings of literacy, and that their pedagogies have always already been multimodal, political and culturally responsive.

Unfortunately their insights often aren't engaged for many reasons, including that university-based researchers may not be in conversations with teachers either through more dialogic methodologies or in scholarly venues, in which practitioner research is underrepresented. This separation makes it easier for those of us located in universities to make generalisations about practitioner and activist contexts – something that would seem to compromise the ideals of scholarship, which in part aspires to be a meticulous account of others' understandings.

This article examines the potential of practitioner research to deepen and concretise our understandings of critical and transformative literacy theories. These contributions are often generated from what we have described as counter-practices: resistant pedagogies that are grounded in consequential connections with students, communities, and larger social movements (Campano & Simon, 2010). We explore the following questions: What happens when school- and community-based practitioners are in dialogue with academic literature in the field of literacy? How can practitioner research encourage educators to develop their own working theories of literacy practice? And what can the broader field of literacy learn from activist practitioner researchers?

We take up these questions within the context of collaborative research conducted in a graduate course Rob taught at the University of Pennsylvania, where he invited participants to engage literacy scholarship through the lenses of their situated knowledge. Debora and Alicia, both teacher activists, were participants in the course. Alicia has worked for many years in community-based adult literacy and ESOL contexts and Debora was a founding teacher of an alternative high school for adolescents who had experienced prior school failure.

In the spirit of the dialogic methodology we advocate for, this is a multi-voiced paper. We first review examples of literacy research generated from practice. Then, Rob and Gerald offer an interpretation of papers Alicia and Debora wrote for Rob's course, drawing on the work of intellectual historian Dominick LaCapra (2004) to conceptualise the relationship between theory and practice. Alicia and Debora respond to this analysis and to each other's work. Finally, we look across the discussions to suggest several interconnected ways that practitioner research methodologies can contribute to a more dialectical vision of literacy practice and theory.

FROM THE LOCATION OF THE CLASSROOM: PRACTITIONER RESEARCH AS A MEANS FOR THEORISING LITERACY AND ENACTING ALTERNATIVES

Fifteen years after their influential publication "A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures," the New London Group (1996) convened in New Orleans, at the 2011 American Educational Research Association (AERA) annual meeting. They retraced their evolving conception of literacy as multiple – related to cultural diversity, new technologies and various semiotic modes (for example, Kress, 2003; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; 2009). In his comments as respondent, Brian Street noted that new approaches to studying literacy, rather than "new" literacies per se, were the focus of ethnographic and sociolinguistic research within the New Literacy Studies

(Gee, 1996, 2010; Street, 1995, 2007). Street encouraged literacy educators and researchers to organise new dialogues as a basis for developing approaches to studying literacy, not just within but also across disciplinary and institutional borders.

This exchange denotes two of the central traditions in the field of literacy since the so-called social turn (Gee, 1996): New Literacy Studies and multiliteracies. Our purpose in making note of them here is to signal some of the frameworks that Rob's students engaged with in his graduate literacy course, as well as to point out who was not present on this panel – literacy practitioners. In this article, we explore how practitioner research can serve as one response to Street's call for new methodological approaches in literacy studies.

Rather than positioning graduate students as novices to be apprenticed into a complex field, or superimposing theories onto their work, Rob invited students to regard his course as a collaborative inquiry into the field of literacy and the New Literacy Studies. The course was a part of a program in which practitioner research was encouraged as a methodological basis for graduate students' investigations into language and literacy learning. Within this context, Rob's course attempted to map the field as a series of conversations individuals were encouraged to enter into from their various experiences and locations as school- and community-based literacy educators and activists.

For example, in addition to reading accounts of the evolution of socially situated theories of literacy (for example, Gee, 1986, 2000; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Street, 1993), in week two of the course, students were asked to write about their prior experiences as educators, their working theories of literacy, and the questions that they brought with them to the course. These brief papers were read aloud to the group in an effort to foreground participants' knowledge and understandings in relation to the literature. As the examples we see in the latter sections of this article illustrate, graduate students used their final term papers to co-articulate their understandings, pedagogies, and emic theoretical orientations with – and in some cases in tension with – claims of established scholars. The course provided an invitation for literacy practitioners to more dialectically engage with this literature, as well as investigate how scholarly conversations may benefit from their perspectives.

Theorising from the thick of things

An alternative intellectual genealogy that traces the political, relational, and theoretical work of practitioners would need to emphasise how conceptual understandings of literacy inhere within empirical realities. Teachers theorise from material, sometimes acutely vulnerable, encounters with students' intellectual and emotional needs. As English educator and teacher researcher Marsha Pincus (2001) highlights in her work, practitioners' inquiries often derive from dissonance. For example, early childhood educator Cynthia Ballenger (1999) recognised that Haitian immigrant children in her kindergarten class used picture books in unconventional ways. These included jumping on or around them, cutting out pages, stockpiling them, sitting on them, and acting out imagined passages during circle time. Rather than regard these practices as confirmation of her students' inappropriate academic behaviour, Ballenger investigated how they were in fact forms of literate engagement.

Ultimately, Ballenger characterised children's relationships with books as linked to a desire to connect with each other, with texts, with her and with school. What may have been understood to be merely resistant or deviant behaviour was re-theorised as a form of lively literate engagement intimately connected to issues of identity, cultural practices, family histories and social relationships.

As Ballenger's example suggests, one important outcome of an inquiry stance into practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001, 2009) involves learning from the autochthonous literacy theories within any given context. For example, when Gerald was a full-time teacher researcher, his students formed a performance art group, "Dancing Across Borders". Gerald eventually realised that their literacy and drama work was inspired by the political theatre of the *Teatro Campesino*, which had strong local roots and living legacies. In addition to naming and resisting issues of inequality in their own lives, Gerald's fifth-grade students also challenged ideologies of individual authorship and fixed texts. Their scripts had multiple authors and were continually revised, often improvisationally during performance (Broyles-González, 1994). This alternative pedagogy and literal (re)enactment of literacy co-existed in tension, and to some degree in contradiction, with the standardised curriculum (Campano, 2007).

In her own research, Pincus (2001, 2010) documents how an inquiry stance on practice invites ongoing questioning. Dissonant moments prompt investigations of practice, which involve documenting and analysing data drawn from the classroom and interrogating relevant research literature. Teachers use inquiries into practice as a basis for developing their understandings of literacy, including their positionalities and practices as educators. Rather than arriving at totalising frameworks or prescriptive methods, however, often the means in practitioner research are ends in themselves (Campano & Simon, 2010; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Simon, 2009). Ongoing tension, conflict or dissonance is the engine for theorising in practitioner research, and improving understandings and teaching "better" are the primary goals (Lytle, 2008).

Because literacy practitioner researchers theorise in the doing, their investigations are, not surprisingly, interrelated and ongoing. For example, Rob participated in an inquiry into the juvenile justice system in San Francisco, in partnership with the mayor's office and a self-help rehabilitation program for former adult offenders called Delancey Street Foundation. This investigation pointed to a need for new programs, including an alternative high-school, Life Learning Academy, for adolescents who had been or were "at risk" of involvement in the criminal justice system (Simon, 2005). Life Learning Academy evolved through ongoing experimentation, such as mixed-age grouping and teaching core subjects through arts and vocational projects, including an organic community garden, a student-run café, and a digital storytelling studio. Rob's background as a printmaker informed his teaching of English through arts-based multidisciplinary inquiry (for example, Albers & Harste, 2007; Simon, 2011), including a civil rights project that explored issues of identity and equity through painting, collage, literature and history. This culminated in a public installation, inspired by the work of Tim Rollins and Kids of Survival (Berry, 2009), which involved painting on book pages torn from the civil rights memoir *Warriors don't cry* (Beals, 1995) (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. “WE”. Painting by students from Life Learning Academy, 2001.

Practitioner researchers draw upon their identities and experiences to question established systems and create more equitable arrangements for student learning. Often, this involves theorising and teaching within and against inherited assumptions and structures. English educator Joan Cone (2002, 2005) offers a fitting example. Cone was concerned with the “caste like” academic placement of students in her California high school. She recognised that most students in her ninth-grade remedial English course were African American males, although they were a minority of the school’s population. In spite of teachers’ ongoing efforts to support their learning within the restrictions of hierarchical tracking structures, Cone’s research revealed that students labelled “low ability” in ninth grade rarely diverted course in future grades. Rather than blaming individual students’ lack of ability, Cone and her colleagues blamed the tracking of students, which they regarded as a failed experiment. They decided to take action to address this inequity, creating heterogeneous classes – including making twelfth-grade Advanced Placement (AP) courses open to any student with the desire to enrol.

Dismantling tracking did not instantly lead to higher achievement or to a more egalitarian educational arrangement. As in most practitioner research, which seeks to not merely surface underlying patterns or practices, but to alter them, new issues emerged in the process of addressing perceived inequities. Cone’s (2002, 2005) scholarship traces attempts to change structural arrangements and pedagogies, a process that was accompanied by profound soul-searching into the faculty’s perceptions of students. Cone and her colleagues’ collective research situates student “failure” and student “achievement” as social constructs, not individual predispositions, and documents a significant rise in the number of African American

and Latina/o students who consequently qualified for the University of California and California State entrance requirements. In spite of these successes, however, Cone's school district has subsequently undone much of their work, under the auspices of better meeting "adequate yearly progress" under *No Child Left Behind*.

As these and other examples suggest (for example, Christensen, 2000; Hatch et al., 2005; Simon, 2012; Vasquez, 2004), practitioner researchers are uniquely positioned to investigate literacy, with the goal of generating conceptual understandings and meaningful pedagogies. In the following section, we draw on the work of Dominick LaCapra (2004) to articulate how developing rich theories of literacy from practice involves continually working through, critiquing and attempting to transform the material conditions and constraints that shape practitioners' work.

“WORKING THROUGH” AS A CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL STANCE

Joan Cone and her colleagues' progress faced a serious setback, as the district resorted to re-tracking and labelling students as "achievers" and "low achievers" (Cone, 2002). Teachers are often regarded as not being adequately progressive or political in their ideologies, but as Joan Cone's example indicates, this is a simplification both of the workings of institutional ideology and the materiality of practice. Even though teachers and students have agency to make change, they are also situated within larger processes of social reproduction in education systems (Bourdieu, 1973). As the examples of Cone and others suggest, practitioner research often involves creatively resisting dominant ideologies and working through contradictions. Generating literacy theories and pedagogical alternatives within the context of institutions marked by normative limits – as well as opportunities for developing meaningful relationships and more ethical arrangements – involves ongoing struggle.

In trying to disrupt the facile narrative of schools failing to live up to the ideals of progressive literacy theories, we turn to the intellectual historian Dominick LaCapra, who is in part known for incisively employing psychoanalytic concepts to understand the relationship of ideas to their contexts. In one of LaCapra's more recent works, *History in transit: Experience, identity, critical theory* (2004) he identifies, in current avant-garde critical thought, a tendency toward a type of all-or-nothing "blank utopianism" that is relentlessly sceptical about current educational institutions, while ever-deferring hope in and expectation for a Messianic future. What this chasm between "high-altitude" theory and imperfect social and educational arrangements glosses over is attention to specificity; this includes both the limits of and "productive countertendencies" to normative social and institutional boundaries as well as the ways in which "collective practice" can both articulate and enact, if only modestly, better and more humane alternatives (pp. 14-15), as the examples of Ballenger, Cone, and others suggest. We believe specific and textured accounts of the epistemic, ethical and political promise of everyday teaching, learning and activism are what practitioner research methodology has to offer the field of literacy studies.

One thing we found intriguing (and moving) in the introduction to LaCapra's book was the way in which he adopted what we would characterise, following Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), as an "inquiry stance" into his work as a teacher, mentor and

administrator in the university, helping to foster cooperative civic spaces “open to vigorous criticism as well as jokes and laughter”, where he became “sensitive to the effect in people’s lives of initiatives, improvements, and modes of relating...short of apocalyptic change but nonetheless of a nature that is both experientially and institutionally worthwhile” (p.17). Consonant with practitioner research’s dialectic between the conceptual and empirical (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Campano, 2009), LaCapra, a scholar associated with rigorous abstract thinking, openly acknowledges a “dialogical relationship” between his “theoretical views” and “experience and subject position in the university” (p.16). He thus challenges the customary university hierarchy between “theorising” and “teaching/service”, where the practice of mentoring, administrating, and organising are not merely an ancillary to scholarly work, but rather sites of knowledge generation (see also, Boyer, 1990).

Over the years LaCapra has developed and honed several concepts that illuminate the nature of knowledge generated from practice: the *symptomatic*, the *critical*, and the *transformative*. Briefly, the symptomatic refers to the continual presence and largely unconscious reproduction of dominant ideologies; the critical offers a vantage point from which to expose and demystify these realities and their incumbent assumptions; and the transformative opens up space for cultivating alternative understandings, practices and social relations. While LaCapra initially employed the concepts with regard to the relationship between texts and their contexts, we believe it is also a useful heuristic through which to understand the process of theorising from practice in specific contexts.

What is important in LaCapra’s use of the terms is that in any given situation all three tendencies may exist, perhaps in different proportions, but often mutually dependent and at times in inextricable balance or tension with one another. LaCapra offers the notion of *working through* as a way of conceptualising how individuals negotiate the dialectical relationships among symptomatic, critical and transformative aspects of their intellectual and material labour. Working through is a methodology that regards these forces as imbricated, and views theoretical and practical dimensions as coextensive. Joan Cone’s attempt to disrupt and enact alternatives to the academic grouping of students by perceived abilities offers an example of working through as a methodological and ethical imperative. Cone was negotiating the symptomatic in the perceptions of students’ abilities, as well as the inherited institutional structures reinforced by habit and ideology. She was critiquing the social construction of low achievement, while at the same time attempting to realise more transformative potentials for students through detracking. While in Cone’s example, the balance sometimes shifted between more or less progressive arrangements, each of these impulses – symptomatic, critical and transformative – existed in ongoing synergy with one another. In simultaneously questioning existing practices and striving to actualise alternatives, Cone was continually working through both at the level of ideas and material realities.

In the sections that follow, Rob and Gerald invoke LaCapra’s frameworks to offer readings of practitioner researcher by Debora and Alicia, who document their attempts to negotiate the dialectic between literacy theory and practice. Their examples illustrate the process of working through normative expectations in order to enact more ethical pedagogies.

“THINKING THROUGH LITERACY”: NEW LITERACY STUDIES AND COMMUNITY-BASED PRACTICES

Alicia came to Rob’s course with generative experiences as a community activist and adult educator that provided grist for her own ongoing conceptualisations of literacy. These experiences include Alicia’s leadership in a popular education-based immigrant community advocacy organisation, English for Action, where she engaged ideas from Paulo Freire (1970/2007) and bell hooks (1994) in what she retrospectively characterises as a community of inquiry. She was also involved in WE LEARN, a national women’s literacy organisation that embraced a critical feminist participatory model, valuing learners’ voices and their capacities to employ literacy as one vehicle for personal and social transformation. This intellectual activism was both informed by, and informed, Alicia’s self-identification as a Latina, immigrant and activist scholar.

Alicia utilised her term paper for Rob’s course as an opportunity to reread her practice as a self-described Freirean, community-based educator through the lens of her current understandings of literacy, informed by readings of New Literacy Studies and multiliteracies theories (for example, Bartlett, 2008; Bartlett and Holland, 2002; Gee, 1986; Heath, 1983; Street, 1995). Guiding Alicia’s inquiry was the question, “How does New Literacy Studies, alongside popular education pedagogy, help us, as learners and facilitators, reconfigure our worlds and create more deeply transformational classrooms?” (Pantoja, 2010, p. 1).

Alicia noted with puzzlement and concern the omission of Freirean perspectives in New Literacy Studies, which in her mind elided apparent connections between these traditions. She hypothesised that Freirean legacies, in the emphasis on the ways that literacy is defined within nested power relations in social contexts, in part “laid out the groundwork for NLS” (Pantoja, 2010, p. 8). Throughout her paper, Alicia argued that both frameworks highlight the political nature of literacy. She noted that Freirean pedagogy may sometimes embrace notions of literacy as having “intrinsic” characteristics, from which follow consequences for society as well for individuals, what New Literacy Studies scholars might problematise as an “autonomous” conception (Street, 1993, p. 5). Drawing upon the work of Bartlett (2008) and Bourdieu (1973), Alicia retheorised her work with adult language learners in terms of relationships and social capital, “built inside and outside the classroom as a result of our learning together” (Pantoja, 2010, p. 5).

One of the contradictions in Alicia’s practice, which she explored in her paper, related to her negotiations of inherited norms and social mores that privileged mainstream literacy over and against those of her students. While she regarded her students as having valuable knowledge and experience, she worked within discourses that situated them as “illiterate”, and saw her role as an educator as helping them to empower themselves through acquisition of dominant language skills. These symptomatic norms (LaCapra, 2004) shaped Alicia’s view of her students, her pedagogy, as well as her own self-image, including her attempts to “‘improve’ my accent in order to teach ‘better’, so that the pronunciation I taught in class was the ‘correct’ one” (Pantoja, 2010, p. 4). Drawing upon Bartlett (2008), Alicia theorised these aspects of her practice as forms of internalised “literacy shaming”.

Alicia's working through (LaCapra, 2004) involved negotiating discourses that positioned her students as illiterate, outside but also within the progressive institutions intended to support their language learning, political consciousness and action. Relating her negotiation of institutionalised deficit discourses to the arguments of Martin (2001) and Street (2005), Alicia noted that these ideologies might support the creation of "community programs that are unintentionally top down and hegemonic" (Pantoja, 2010, p. 9). Alicia recounted the paradox in this work, noting: "these programs, according to Bartlett and Holland commit a similar 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu, 1973), or what Freire (1970/2007) calls oppression, that they seek to fight against" (Pantoja, 2010, p. 10). At the same time, many community-based educational programs are already critical, with the capacity for and interest in developing more equitable pedagogies. They are also self-reflective, creating the conditions for critiquing current practices – their own included – as well as exploring more just alternatives.

To capture her evolving understandings of the conceptual relationship between the "parallel and overlapping worlds" of New Literacy Studies and community-based education, Alicia developed a Venn diagram (see Figure 2) that explored the tensions but also the synergies between these traditions. On the left side of her diagram, Alicia portrayed the field of New Literacy Studies as interested in redefining literacy through uncovering local practices (Street, Rogers & Baker, 2006). On the right, she characterised popular education's concern with advancing progressive change, but not necessarily in redefining what constitutes literacy itself. Alicia theorises the relationship between the impulse to discern language and literacy practices, and the imperative to break with inherited patterns in order to actualise some forms of individual and social transformation. This is an orientation that characterises community-based activist as well as critical practitioner research traditions (Campano, 2009). As Alicia notes, critical pedagogy introduces aspects that are missing in some scholarly approaches, namely "a vehicle for *acting on* literacy/learning/ideological beliefs instead of a theoretical lens only" (Pantoja, 2010, p. 15):

By ignoring popular education... this field can become disconnected from a history and movement of scholars and communities committed and invested in similar values and goals. Moreover, I believe popular education provides a practice that, in important ways, reflects some of the most valuable ideas argued for within NLS theories. (Pantoja, 2010, p. 15)

Drawing upon her understandings of New Literacy Studies, Alicia arrived at a conception of critical literacy pedagogy that included inviting students to interrogate their own subject positions within dominant language discourses and to regard themselves as already literate as a basis for acquiring new language practices. As Pincus' (2001) description of practitioner research methodology suggests, Alicia's dissonance was an opportunity to raise questions and investigate concerns in practice, which fed back into her attempts to support language learners in her classroom. Her conceptual work derived from her day-to-day experiences as an educator committed to immigrant youth and families.

“COLLABORATIVE DESIGN”: MULTILITERACIES AND ARTS-BASED PEDAGOGIES

Alicia’s example illustrates how on the ground community advocacy – what Sor Juana might call “cooking” – and conceptual labour, are intertwined processes. Like Alicia, Debora brought a range of experiences to Rob’s course, including a background in English education, creative writing, and visual arts. Her understandings of literacy and pedagogy were developed in communities of artists and musicians. She found participation in creative work to be personally sustaining, as well as a means for developing her own conceptual understandings of teaching. Debora was a founding teacher of an alternative high school for adolescents who had experienced prior academic struggles, much like Life Learning Academy. Though the students had been labelled “at-risk” – a term encompassing a myriad of social and institutional experiences including drug addiction and involvement with the criminal justice system – Debora was struck by the contradiction between students’ talents and their prior histories of school failure.

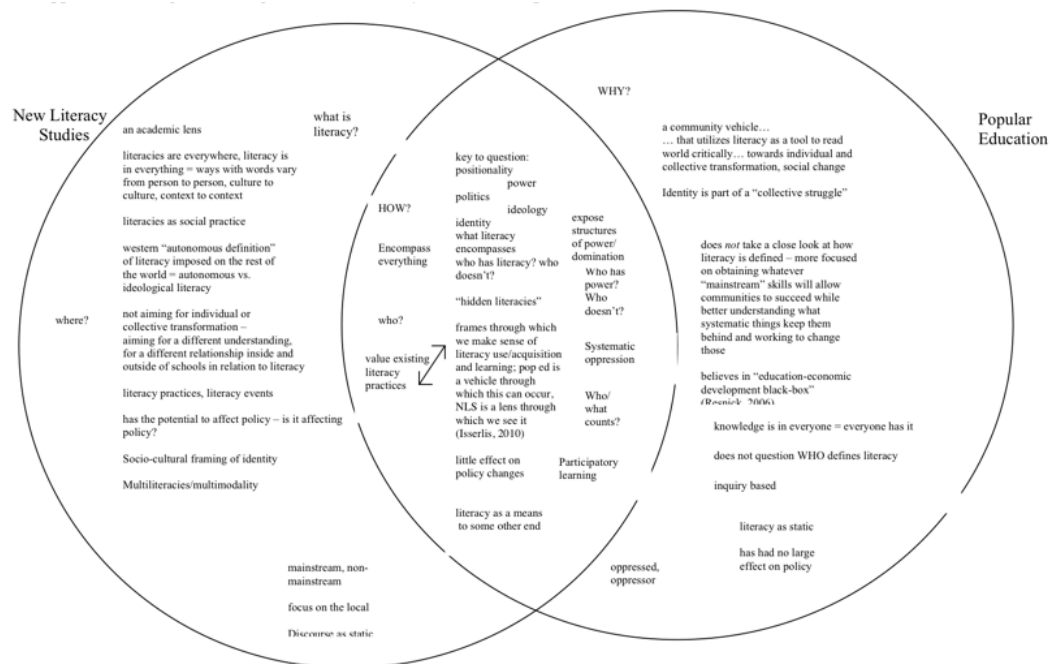


Figure 2. Alicia’s co-articulation of New Literacy Studies and community-based education

In an effort to address this contradiction, Debora started a multimedia literary arts journal with students so that they could collectively explore their lived experiences through creative work (see Figure 3). Reflecting on this work, Debora saw resonance between her teaching and educational phenomenologist Patricia Carini’s (2001) argument for recognising children’s “widely distributed human capacity to be makers and doers, active agents in the world and their own lives” (p. 50). The journal, with an attached CD of music and prose performances, was an attempt to capitalise on the interests of students who self-identified as artists and intellectuals (Campano & Ghiso, 2011) in spite of institutional attempts to position them as less than academically capable. Students named the journal *Concrete Voices*, in Debora’s words, “to symbolically represent the power and permanency of their voices in the world”

(Broderick, personal communication, March 5, 2012). *Concrete Voices* would be considered impressive, even if it were created by professional artists. It has been widely distributed and has garnered numerous accolades for its innovative design and literary merit.

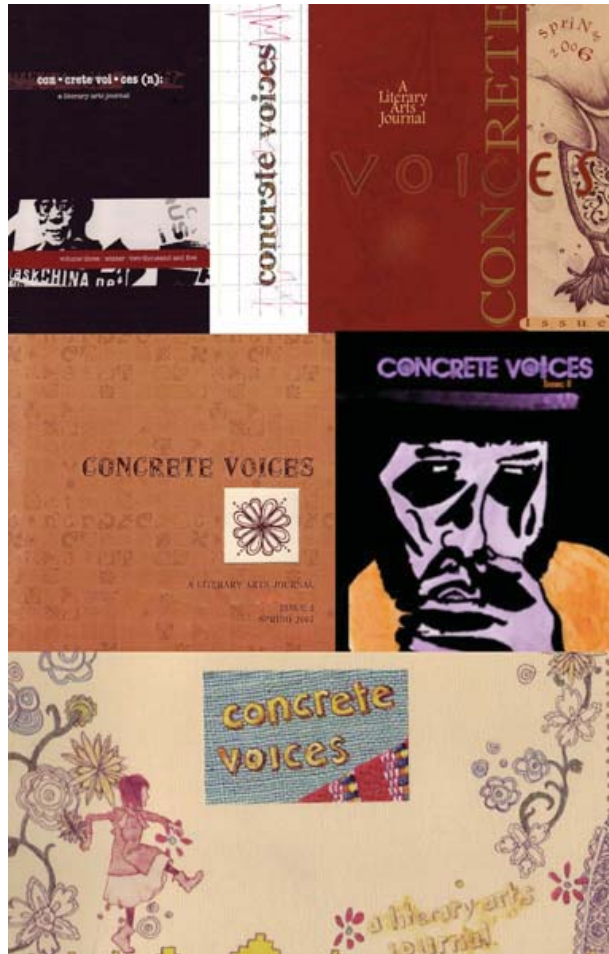


Figure 3. Sample covers from *Concrete Voices*.

Before encountering the concept of “multimodality” (for example, Kress, 2003) in her graduate coursework, Debora employed multiple media in her own pedagogy. As Debora pointed out in Rob’s class, she and many other graduate students had no prior encounters with social practice perspectives on literacy in their credentialing programs or professional development. As some researchers have noted (for example, Pahl & Rowsell, 2012; Street, 2005), New Literacy Studies has implications for teachers, but historically has been concerned with ethnographic investigations of literacy rather than classroom practice.

Debora’s critical stance, like her interest in arts integration, emanated from her own social commitments, as well as an acknowledgment that more traditional approaches to teaching English had failed her students. Debora recognised that “the ‘risk’ label combined with deficit-based pedagogical models [impacted her] students’ ability to succeed and imagine a positive future” (Broderick, 2010, p. 6). In her relationships with students over time, Debora found that “rethinking risk and rethinking traditional

pedagogy has the potential to disrupt accepted labelling practices” (p. 10). One of the paradoxes of her work was that Debora, like Rob, was afforded the pedagogical flexibility and curricular space to challenge “at risk” labels precisely because she was in a school whose *raison d’être* was to work with “at risk” students. This simultaneous reifying and challenging of deficit ideologies may be regarded as one of the symptomatic contradictions that Debora and Rob encountered in their attempts to actualise alternative possibilities for adolescents.

In the process of creating *Concrete Voices*, Debora interrogated a number of assumptions – her own and others’ – that were symptomatic of the contexts in which she taught. These included deeply held beliefs about the abilities of her students, which were not merely insufficient accounts of their capabilities, as Debora learned, but also indicative of circulating discourses about the kinds of interventions that such youth require to be successful. As Joan Cone (2002) notes, schools commonly place adolescents like Debora’s students in remedial courses with skills-based approaches to teaching that allow few opportunities for creative intellectual work.



Figure 4. Debora’s re-articulation of multiliteracies in relation to “collaborative design” (Adapted from Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 26)

In Rob’s course, Debora was drawn to multiliteracies research (New London Group, 1996) because it regarded visual arts as a form of literacy. She used the opportunity of the final paper to write with and back to the New London Group, to explore the relationships between her work on *Concrete Voices* and multiliteracies theories. Debora did a fine-grained analysis of a single-page spread in one issue of *Concrete Voices*, noting that while design-based theories were useful in thinking about visual

and other extra-textual aspects, they did not always account for the classroom community, which Debora understood to be the heart of her work. Debora described how the layout required several months' collaboration involving nine students: an artist, two models, two writers, a layout designer, a CD editor, art editor and journal editor. She theorised this as "collaborative design", represented visually in a diagram she included in her paper (see Figure 4). Debora noted that "the collaborative design element finds its way into all aspects of the journal production – from creating original art and writing, to the digital composing of page layouts, to the team effort of fundraising and planning coffee house events" (p. 21).

Returning to LaCapra (2004), Debora's work may be regarded as an attempt at working through symptomatic and critical dimensions of practice toward the realisation of a more transformative pedagogy. Citing Hull and Nelson's (2005) claim that multimodal work "transcends the collective contribution of its constituent parts" (p. 225), Debora used the experience of designing *Concrete Voices* to make an argument about how *individuals*, not just modes, interrelate. Debora theorised literacy from practice, in particular the relationships that she and her students forged, as they challenged deficit labels and engaged in collective self-representation and definition through their creative work. In the process, they claimed new identities, individually and collectively, as successful artists and poets.

ENACTING A DIALOGIC METHODOLOGY

As Rob and Gerald's analysis of Alicia's and Debora's work suggests, for practitioners, working through critical impulses as well as symptomatic contradictions (LaCapra, 2004) – in the forms of ideologies, institutional structures or inherited beliefs – is a means of theorising literacy. Earlier, we argued that this methodology involves a more dialectical relationship between practice and theory (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). As we have noted, one of our concerns as former teachers and current university-based scholars is that the intimate relationship of theory and practice, and the rich experiential knowledge of practitioners, is elided in some articulations of literacy theory. In order to represent our ongoing collaboration with Debora and Alicia and to enact the methodology that we argue for, in this next section, Alicia and Debora respond to Gerald and Rob's readings of their work.

Alicia's response

I am a multilingual, Latina, immigrant, woman, educator, learner, activist, family member and scholar, standing at what Gloria Anzaldúa calls the "borderlands" (2007). I find it impossible to separate my mutually constitutive identities (Hames-Garcia, 2011) and my related political commitments, as I negotiate the boundaries of home, community, university and nationhood. The "borderlands" is a liminal space, where one inhabits different worlds and identities at once, transgresses orthodoxy and feels at home in the discomforts that come with multiple affiliations and commitments. The borderlands of my own life and work have entailed efforts to provide better life opportunities for those most vulnerable in the educational system, including immigrant youth and families who are often ascribed second-class status and criminalised through media coverage and nativist policies.

As Rob and Gerald have highlighted, generating knowledge of and from practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) often involves ongoing struggle. In my experience, these struggles can be epistemically generative rather than merely debilitating. Practitioner inquiry helps me work through struggle productively because it requires taking systematic and delicate steps rooted in uncertainty and fallibility (Campano, 2007). This methodology demands continuous personal and collaborative reflection regarding our positionalities and a commitment to improving practice.

As an educator, I have found that taking an inquiry stance sometimes involves discomfort, which I have found indispensable for a lasting, rather than ephemeral, transformation. Building on my previous work teaching ESL to adult immigrants and Freirean pedagogy to ESL instructors, I currently facilitate professional development courses for educators of immigrant and refugee students. Our learning is grounded in critical conversations that sometimes disrupt mainstream discourses and their accompanying classroom practices. For example, one such conversation involved interrogating what teachers mean when they refer to immigrant students and families as “illegals,” and the ethical and human implications of such accusatory, but often unexamined, language. In another tense exchange, we explored – and challenged – the belief that immigrant families do not value their children’s education. In both cases, I found myself in an uncomfortable and contradictory position. On the one hand, as a Latina and immigrant activist, I felt indignant at some of the racist turns in the discussions. On the other hand, as an educator, I felt committed to all my students and dedicated to creating a space where we could work through discomfort to critically engage with some of education’s most significant issues through multiple perspectives and dialogue. Such conversations ignited from a quick comment or disagreement, and could have easily gone unexplored, because avoidance may have been the path of least resistance for many of the participants. However, in the “borderlands”, uneasiness is the very air we breathe.

I see practitioner research as a unique, dialogic methodology to collectively work for social change. Like Anzaldúa, I believe literacy researchers must seek to counter the dominant culture’s version of reality with alternative accounts where “there are other ways of writing...other ways of thinking...other philosophies” (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2000, p. 229). The field of literacy studies must engage these alternatives and, in doing so, understand, support, include and work alongside minoritised communities *already working* for justice and change.

If the field of literacy studies ignores the contributions of practitioners, community members and activists, it risks excluding their insights and perspectives that ultimately help us to better understand the world we all share. Moreover, such insularity is likely to make the field less influential to the very communities it wishes to impact. What is gained in academics’ theorising about literacy if their doing so will not result in a change in practice and policy that benefits all learners and educators? What happens when theoretical conversations remain between academics? Do they remain inaccessible to those outside of their esoteric discourses? Is the field identifying and critiquing unjust power dynamics with regards to literacy, yet enacting parallel hierarchies by not engaging the knowledge of practitioners through more inclusive methodologies? How can we create a borderland space for literacy research?

Debora's Response

In examining both my own and Alicia's work, Rob and Gerald surface the multiple dissonances and tensions present in our respective sites of practice. They characterise these moments as openings where Alicia and I were able to critically question our practices in an attempt to develop more ethical and humane pedagogies. This dissonance, or what Bob Fecho (2001) terms "a threat", was a place for critical inquiry, where my students and I could rethink and redefine what counts as literacy and learning. The presence of a threat, in this case, my students' material reality of being positioned as "at-risk", required me to reconsider traditional pedagogy and search for alternatives, ways that honoured the rich and varied literacy practices of my students, and offered them a space to examine the intersections of their "remembered, lived, and projected experiences" (Sumara, 1996, p. 233). *Concrete Voices* was borne out of this reconsideration, and developed out of what Lytle (2000) calls "a felt need" – a recognition of dissonance and a sense of urgency to do things differently, to create what LaCapra (2004) would call a space for transformation.

At the time (prior to beginning my doctoral work), I was unaware of university-based theories of literacy as a social practice (Street, 1993), yet I was already theorising and re-theorising my practice on a day-to-day basis. Being in conversation with university-based scholars and practitioners has challenged me to dig into my past, examine my lived experiences, and project what this all might mean for my future personal and professional life. Living intentionally at the interstices has opened up spaces for rethinking who I am as a white, middle-class teacher, mother, wife, daughter, graduate student, artist and writer. When I first entered the academy, I was "desperate" (hooks, 1994, p. 59) to theoretically understand not only what I was doing in my classroom, but to make sense of my own location within a seemingly monolithic educational organisation. Like hooks (1994), this turn toward theory did not sever my connection to practice; in fact, it has done the opposite:

When our lived experience of theorising is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experience makes more evident is the bond between the two – that ultimately reciprocal process where one enables the other (hooks, 1994, p. 61).

I keenly feel this "reciprocal process" – where my practice feeds my scholarly work, and my scholarly work finds its way into my daily practice.

As Alicia notes above, I too cannot separate my multiple identities into discrete categories; they are mutually constitutive (Hames-García, 2011) and guide my work in the world. My current work with early, pre-service teachers is nurtured by my previous experiences with students on *Concrete Voices*. Through this history, I am compelled to enact an intentional pedagogy of resistance, one that asks students to take an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), question the status quo, and develop an ethical orientation to practice. As a practising teacher and teacher-researcher, I believe I have an ethical responsibility to participate in what Bourdieu (2003) refers to as "scholarship with commitment" (p. 24). Bourdieu (2003) argues that researchers must step outside of the often-esoteric academic universe and take action in the larger social world. This means becoming advocates for educational reforms that seek to address issues of equity, access and democracy. Like Alicia, I too believe that practitioners' voices must be included in these theoretical conversations.

School- and community-based practitioners have a legacy of enacting activist methodologies in order to not only address the needs of their learners, but to work toward a more humane world.

CONCLUSION

As we look across the dialogue, we identify several interconnected ways that practitioner research methodologies can contribute to a more dialectical vision of literacy practice and theory. We believe practitioner research has the potential to do the following:

Illustrate the epistemic role of dissonance and struggle: All these examples point to how, in practitioner research, working through dissonance is a catalyst for theorising. As practitioners individually and collectively work toward visions of social justice in their local contexts, they encounter barriers to equity, normative boundaries and personal vulnerability that critically induce new conceptualisations and understandings of literacy. This is evident in Alicia's self-reflexivity about her own identity as a language-learner, or the ways in which Gerald's former students in *Dancing Across Borders* mobilised literacy practices inspired by the *Teatro Campesino* in order to challenge how they had been positioned in school. These examples illustrate how the symptomatic is inherent to practice, but suggest that conflict is a necessary part of intellectual growth and social change.

Specify textured and realistic accounts of change: Practitioner researchers' reconceptualisations of literacy in turn shape practice, prefiguring new pedagogical arrangements that aspire to transform, if never fully transcend, contexts of teaching and learning for the better. Practitioner research is often oriented to specifying and enacting alternatives – “realistic” (Bourdieu, 2003) rather than “blank” (Lacapra, 2004) utopias – to the many constraints literacy practitioners navigate daily as they work within and often against the contradictions and potentials of their lived realities. This can be seen in the example of Rob's and Debora's students, who didn't simply “transform” themselves, but continued to *work through* the challenges of life struggles as well as their incumbent institutional ascriptions. At the same time, they employed the arts as a palpable and multimodal vehicle of self-definition, and a venue to display their talents to wider audiences.

Challenge either/or categories: These alternative accounts often disrupt customary distinctions that can serve to polarise, such as binaries between “high-altitude” theory and practice, claims about what is or is not happening in classrooms, divisions between “practitioner audiences” and “research audiences”, and views of pedagogy as either being “radically” transformative or merely in the service of social reproduction. Through the cultivation of communities of inquiry that transverse institutional boundaries, practitioner research can help expand both what counts as knowledge in literacy research as well as ensuring that this knowledge is created and disseminated in dialogue, drawing upon the experiential resources and perspectives of individuals from diverse social locations. It may also involve individuals understanding the epistemic importance of their own blended and, as Alicia suggests, “borderland” identities. We may not have to choose between being practitioners, researchers, activists, or cultural beings; all aspects of our selves potentially exist in a synergistic

relationship to help inform our understandings of literacy research, practice and advocacy.

Keep our work focused on what matters: The on-the-ground nature of practitioner research and accountability to immediate student well-being may serve as a reminder that literacy research might be focused on, following Barton and Hamilton (2000), “a means to some other end” (p. 12). Across this article we suggest that end may ultimately involve imagining and sustaining more equitable, ethical, respectful relationships with our students. Practitioner research as an activist methodology is not just about discerning patterns of literacy practice or developing conceptual models, but ultimately prioritises creating the conditions for student flourishing.

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