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Abstract
The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which literacy histories and present literacy experiences of doctoral students shaped their literacy identities. Data were collected through surveys, interviews, and visual identity representations. This paper focuses on the literacy stories of two doctoral students with positive literacy identities. Findings suggest that participants valued literacy as a social learning experience from an early age through higher education. These social experiences with reading and writing can take many forms and can be embraced in various home and school contexts. Additionally, these findings highlight the need for schools to create and nurture such experiences across all grade levels, through multiple forums, which may lead to positive literacy identities.

Keywords
literacy identity, doctoral students, literacy history, social learning

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Shaping our Literate Lives: Examining the Role of Literacy Experiences in Shaping Positive Literacy Identities

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INTRODUCTION

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is a valuable approach to advancing teaching and can guide faculty’s choices related to pedagogy, curriculum, and other factors involved in student success in higher education (Bender & Gray, 1999; Gale & Golde, 2004; Huber & Robinson, 2016). This helps us to understand how students learn and the instructional practices that support learning. In considering the importance of SoTL, we recognize that new knowledge should be built on what’s known as we consider how we can improve teaching and learning through research (Kreber, 2005; McKinney, 2003; Trigwell, 2013; Weimer, 1997). This guides our work with social learning experiences and research on identity.

Social learning has long been a focus of literacy education (Perry, 2012; Street, 1984). This idea supports the notion that students learn with and from others as they bring their personal experiences to their reading and writing. These personal experiences can influence the identity of students and how they “interact, respond, and learn in classrooms” (McCarthey & Moje, 2002, p. 229). With this in mind, it is important to examine these social learning experiences and how specifically they can impact the identity of learners.

Research has shown that social literacy opportunities have a positive impact on literacy learning (Flint, 2010; Griffin, 2002; Perez, 1998; Schunk, 2012). If literacy identities are socially constructed (Gee, 2012; Moje & Luke, 2009), and it is our goal as educators to foster positive literacy identities, it is important to examine the social activities that shape positive literacy identities in order to further explore ways in which to provide positive literacy experiences for students.

This study seeks to understand the social literacy learning experiences that two successful doctoral students, with positive literacy identities, value by examining their literacy histories. Using a sociocultural lens, this study was guided by the following question: How do the literacy histories and experiences of doctoral students shape their positive literacy identities? These findings could support higher education instructors in the SoTL process as they work to meet the literacy needs of their students across a range of disciplines. Through this research we hope that professors across institutions can draw on this work to advance teaching and learning (Felten, 2013; McKinney, 2003), specifically related to social literacy practices in higher education. Furthermore, by engaging students in social literacy experiences, we can improve the quality of students’ academic opportunities. As this study provides information related to the social literacy experiences of doctoral students, professors may use this information to design courses that promote social learning and nurture positive literacy identities.

Theoretical Framework

The sociocultural perspective views language learning as socially constructed experiences that are part of the cultural context of learners (Lave, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1993). Learning and constructing meaning are social practices (Cook-Gumperz, 1996; Gee, 2012; Wenger, 1999). These theories assert knowledge is constructed through social interactions, with students learning first through social interactions with peers and adults and eventually extending and internalizing knowledge to act independently (Vygotsky, 1978). These theories guided our current study and have also influenced other research on literacy identities (Gee, 2012; Kajee, 2008; McCarthy & Moje, 2002; Moje & Luke, 2009). Specifically, the sociocultural framework was used to help examine how doctoral students described their literacy histories, their literacy social experiences and the context in which these experiences occurred. The significance of this study is its contribution to our evolving understanding of literacy identities and how they are socially constructed.

Review of the Literature Identities

To understand literacy identities we must first define what we mean by identities and literacy. Both identity and literacy have multiple interpretations across different theories and fields of study (Moje & Luke, 2009). We borrow from Holland and colleagues to define identities as “self-understandings” or the ways in which people “tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 3). While identities are enacted by the individual, they are socially constructed. Group membership, social interactions with others, and different contexts shape the identities people take on (McCarthy & Moje, 2012; Kajee, 2008; McCarthy & Moje, 2002; Moje & Luke, 2009).
Identity is varied, multiple across time and context, and constantly evolving. A renewed understanding of the definition of identities as "self-understandings" consider how these understandings of oneself change with new experiences as well as shifting understandings of past experiences. Identities are not rigid and definite but rather, they are brought to life when recognized by others within relationships or social contexts. This is important in the teaching and learning process. Teachers can play a role in supporting the learning of students through social literacy experiences.

Literacy Identities
We use a sociocultural perspective to conceptualize literacy as a set of social practices (Street, 1984). Literacy is "what people do with reading, writing, and texts in real world contexts and why they do it" (Perry, 2012, p. 54). These literacy practices occur in specific social contexts and are influenced by the historical, cultural, and power structures within these contexts (Street, 1984). Because identities are social constructs, institutions play an active role in the development of individual's identity construction (Holland et al., 1991). The home, the community and the school are distinct but overlapping layers of influence in which people develop perceptions of themselves as readers and writers -- perceptions that make up literacy identities.

Both texts and literacy practices serve as the tools for shaping the literacy identities individuals construct, enact, and explore in various situations (Moje & Luke, 2009). Moreover, the development of identity is a constant process, one that is developed, read, written, and discussed in different contexts (McCarthy & Moje, 2002). The reciprocal relationship between one's identities and one's literacy experiences are indistinguishable, thus creating an ever-evolving sense of self as a literate being (Gea, 1996; Kajee, 2008; McCarthy, 2002). Therefore, one's literacy identities can be understood as co-constructed and socially situated self-understandings, both in and out of school contexts, in various contexts and over time. With this in mind, we define positive literacy identities as positive self-understandings and self-perceptions in relation to literacy.

Literacy Stories and Representations of Literacy Identities
A sense of self, or identity, can be understood through stories (McAdams, 1993; McKinney & Giorgis, 2009) and visual representations (Adams-Budde, Howard, Jolliff, & Myers, 2014; Hall & Burns, 2009; Johnson, 2012; Kriner, Coffman, Adlison, & Compton-Lilly, 2015; Noone, 2015; Noone, 2015; Noone, 2015). These stories included as a visual representation to share their literacy experiences throughout their lives (their literacy histories), both at school and at home, shape their ever-evolving literacy identities. We also believe that students' stories related to these experiences offer insight into the process of their literacy identities construction. While we recognize that there is much research in the areas of literacy and identity, this research is not focused on the identity of doctoral students. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the role of social literacy learning experiences on the literacy identities of two doctoral students.

METHODS
This research study uses a case study approach (Yin, 2009) in order to examine how the literacy histories and experiences of doctoral students shaped their literacy identities. Each participant were engaged in semi-structured interviews. The interviews were tape recorded, transcribed, and coded using constant comparison analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To create a baseline for coding and analysis, the four researchers coded one interview individually. Researchers then discussed and analyzed emerging themes found in the data, resulting in six themes. Following discussion and analysis, the initial six descriptive themes (Piles & Huberman, 1994) were collapsed into past literacy experiences, present literacy experiences, perceptions of social literacy, and social literacy. From here, each researcher independently read and coded the remaining interviews using the collapsed themes. In this process, comparisons were made across interviews using constant comparison analysis. For the purpose of this article, data related to the social experiences theme is presented.

RESULTS
Data revealed that doctoral students with strong, confident literacy identities valued the social literacy experiences that served to shape their literacy identities. Additionally, results of the study revealed that the participants also held strong, positive literacy identities in higher education programs. In sharing their literacy stories, these two participants explored their experiences on their most memorable experiences, which focused on their early and recent experiences with literacy and did not include experiences from the middle of their literacy identity development. A description of each case follows.

Julie
Julie's positive literacy identities were evident throughout the study. Not only did survey data show Julie as having positive literacy identities, but also interviews. In this process, comparisons were made across interviews using constant comparison analysis. For the purpose of this article, data related to the social experiences theme is presented.

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see herself as a writer. Julie began to identify as a writer through this social learning process. Julie also shared similar discussions and feedback from her professors in the doctoral program assisted her in achieving success as a published author in scholarly publications.

Julie not only appreciated the supportive interactions with her professors, but she valued shared literacy and learning experiences with her peers as well. In the interview Julie stated, "The assignments we have when you have to read someone else's work, that's always helpful too because someone else will think of something so that I could think about as well." Julie respected the multiple perspectives of her peers and appreciated the opportunity to give and receive feedback. Additionally, while the class discussion boards were not face-to-face social interactions, Julie gained insight from those as well. "The discussion boards where we have to post and comment, I always learn a little bit about different ways to approach a topic or write something". Julie not only enjoyed the social learning provided by discussions in class, but her social learning extended beyond traditional classroom approaches and veered into broader online social forums.

Throughout her interview, Julie discussed her two blogs. She used one blog as an outlet to write about her children and to share her literacy and learning experiences. Her other blog was an educational technology blog where she focused on topics she taught in her classroom, staff development, ideas for teachers using technology, etc. Julie shared, "My blog has helped me get out there and make some connections with other educators and education researchers. I also do a lot of research analyzing my 46 characters as less. I'm on Twitter a lot with other educators, so I make connections that way as well. I think things like blogs and Twitter like out there...you just sort of bounce ideas off of people. Julie used the Internet as a tool for writing and sharing her learning. She also used it as a tool for learning. This social approach helped Julie share information and be a resource for others.

While discussions with her face-to-face and online peers were valued, Julie also had what she called a "critical friend," "I have a critical friend, who reads all my stuff and gives me really good feedback. I've done the same for him...So having a critical friend has really helped and we've also had a couple of things published together. We've read each other's writing so much that it helps our writing style a bit of a flow better when we try to write something together. Having a critical friend provided Julie with someone who offered support and encouragement as well as constructive feedback for her writing. This relationship helped develop Julie's writing skills, her confidence as a scholarly writer and her literacy identities. As previously mentioned, participants were asked to create an image that visually represented their literacy identities. Julie's visual representation was a sketch of her sitting at her computer desk and extended into the realm of social media. In the corner of Julie’s illustration were two children with books reading together, representing her own children and again showcasing the value she put on social literacy experiences.

All of these experiences described by Julie in her discussion of her visual representation are social literacy experiences. As a child, she valued the opportunity to read with her sister, her mother, and those at school. Julie found value in these experiences throughout her adult life. Just as Julie read at night before bed with her mother and sister, Julie continued to read at night before bed, "that's what you did when you were little...something you do now". She also discussed that as adults, she and her sister continued to share books, passing them along to each other once they had finished them. Julie shared literacy experiences within her family, reading with her sister and mother, and receiving writing feedback from both her parents.

"I don't think I would turn them in...so I was like my first grade...so it was just cool having the two of them to always go over your writing. As for my writing, I would always make us write hand-written thank you notes ever since we could. These examples represent the idea that in addition to reading, writing was a social experience, and one highly valued in Eve's family. She discussed the fact that her father marked her papers a lot with corrections but "the end result was it was a better paper". Her parents provided her feedback on school writing assignments and additionally valued writing as a tool to communicate with the requirement of formal, hand-written thank you notes. These social writing experiences made Eve feel more confident in herself as a writer and she described her early literacy learning processes. For both participants this social literacy learning process was an important part of their social learning processes. For both participants this social literacy learning process took place with a variety of individuals. Eve valued feedback, noting that her papers often ended up covered in ink from her parents, but that it helped her to revise her work, and later gave her confidence as a writer. In her interview, Eve discussed how feedback helped her in writing for publication and conference presentations, "I want the comments, and I don't take it personally or even read the negative comments. But if you get a lot of feedback, it was easier to accept feedback as a doctoral student to recognize her weaknesses and learn how to turn them into opportunities for improvement." Julie also shared the important role of feedback in her development as a writer. For Julie, this feedback came from both face-to-face interactions and online discussion boards and social media forums with her peers. Blogging also provided an opportunity for teaching, learning, and sharing ideas outside her immediate context. Julie's critical friend supported her work through shared reading and writing experiences that not only propelled her positive literacy identities but also served to increase her contributions to the field of literacy and learning through publications. Other researchers have also found peer feedback to be an effective teaching technique in getting graduate students to think more critically about their work as well as gain confidence in their abilities (Bernadowski & Aspinall, 2014; Maher et al., 2008).

Creating Spaces

The visual representations of both participants show important past and current spaces where social literacy was and is important for them. We believe, as Lefebvre (1991) suggests, space is not a fixed background but is a social practice through which people are produced. It is the meaning people do in spaces that shape the spaces people do in. For example, Julie remembers sitting on the couch with her parents and siblings as a small child and the novels doing the same with her children. In Eve’s case, the “past” spaces she described were at the library where there was “kind’s section” and read aloud opportunities, and at home in her bedroom with her mother and sister at bedtime. Although Eve no longer shares a physical space with her sister, such
as their bedroom growing up, they continue to talk about and share books with each other.

For Jules, the combination of her social literacy learning occurs with her friends and through her computer. As an adult, Julie’s social literacy learning occurs in both physical and virtual spaces. Rather than seeing these spaces as separate, researchers such as Leander and McKim (2003) suggest that in many online spaces are interwoven and embedded in broader social practices.

**IMPLICATIONS**

As students are said to construct new knowledge through participation in social practices (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1993), it is important to examine how teachers in K-12 classrooms and higher education can work to integrate these lessons into their instruction. Because identities are social constructs (Holland et al., 1998), classrooms can play an active role in the development of individual identities. As noted by these participants, their most memorable social literacy experiences were with friends and family at an early age, and much later, in their higher education courses with professors and peers. There is no mention of positive social literacy experiences in school until these participants reached the college level, which begs the question of how to create and nurture these experiences that lead to positive literacy identities throughout school for students. With this in mind, in the field of teacher preparation in higher education, we believe it is essential to provide students with the foundational understanding and corresponding practices so that they can ensure their own students have opportunities to engage in collaborative learning experiences around reading and writing.

We turn to higher education for this discussion. The data illustrate the need to provide opportunities for students to use collaboration, communication and discussion of reading and writing in the development of social learning as a young adult. Research suggests that classroom contexts should foster an environment where students can read and write together and share multiple perspectives that can help them critically think about these experiences. This study of students’ social learning in their higher education classrooms indicates several factors that can influence social learning. The various interactions and contexts of diverse groups can serve to be beneficial because having multiple perspectives may provide understanding into how diverse groups define literacy and engage in social learning experiences. It is important to note that students in this study who were involved in writing and sharing their ideas to one another shared a mindset that values the social nature of literacy learning. As students are said to construct new knowledge through participation in social practices, it is important to ensure students have experiences in higher education that provide insight into the types of literacies that are valued in various communities.

**LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study provides clear examples of the importance of literacy as a social experience. However, while reflecting and critically evaluating our research process, we identified several limitations. This study represents a small sample of doctoral students in one program at one university. This study participants, as seen in our analysis of our data, are mostly female and female or gender. These limitations lead to opportunities for future research. For example, using a SoTL lens, we could recruit participants across the institution to explore the richness of literacy and social learning. Research suggests that classroom contexts should foster an environment where students can read and write together and share multiple perspectives that can help them critically think about these experiences. This study of students’ social learning in their higher education classrooms indicates several factors that can influence social learning. The various interactions and contexts of diverse groups can serve to be beneficial because having multiple perspectives may provide understanding into how diverse groups define literacy and engage in social learning experiences. It is important to note that students in this study who were involved in writing and sharing their ideas to one another shared a mindset that values the social nature of literacy learning. As students are said to construct new knowledge through participation in social practices, it is important to ensure students have experiences in higher education that provide insight into the types of literacies that are valued in various communities.

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