July 2017

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Recommended Citation
Howard, Christy M.; Adams-Budde, Melissa; Myers, Joy; and Jolliff, Grant (2017) “Shaping our literate lives: Examining the role of literacy experiences in shaping positive literacy identities of doctoral students,” International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: Vol. 11: No. 2, Article 8.
Available at: https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsotl.2017.110208
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Abstract
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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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(Received 25 July 2016; Accepted 6 February 2017)

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.

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; McCarthey & 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 (McCarthey & Moje,
Literacy Identities

We use a biographical 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., 1998). 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, these literacy practices are not fixed, but are constantly re-discovered, re-imagined, and re-narrated, creating an ever-evolving sense of self as a literate being (Gee, 1996; Kajee, 2008; McCartney & Moje, 2002). The reciprocal relationship between one’s identities and one’s literacy experiences is profound, which supports the idea that language is both a tool of expression and a means of shaping one’s own identity. While literacy is critical to students’ development of scholarly identities, these studies focus only on students’ experiences while at school. We believe that students’ identities 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 identities of how one navigates new identities as scholars. 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 literate 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 was engaged in a semi-structured interview (four participants) throughout the data collection process. This structure allowed researchers to carefully examine how the participants viewed their literacy experiences and stories through surveys, visual representations and interviews.

Participants and Context

The participants represented in this article are part of a larger study by Drake et al. (2011) and involved former doctoral students in the Teacher Education Higher Education (THEE) Ph.D. program at a university in the southeast region of the United States. All seventy-four students enrolled in the program were invited to participate. Thirty-six students agreed to participate, and this article represents the case studies of two participants, Julie and Eve (pseudonyms). These two individuals were selected due to their high literacy survey scores revealing that their current, positive literacy identities, and their success and experiences in the Ph.D. program. In addition, these participants were willing to share their educational histories and experiences across all participants with high literacy survey scores.

Julie was in her third year of the program as a doctoral student focusing on Instructional Technology and Professional Development. At the time she was working as an Instructional Technology Facilitator. Julie was 33 years old, White, female. Prior to enrolling in the doctoral program, she worked as a classroom teacher. Julie was enrolled in her doctoral program as a doctoral student with a focus in Student Affairs. She was 35 years old, White, and prior to enrolling in the doctoral program, she worked as a mental health counselor at a university.

Data Collection

This study used multiple sources of data (Yin, 2009) including surveys, semi-structured interviews and visual representations created by the participants. The survey instrument was created by the researchers using current literate identity literacy (Gee, 2006; McCarthy, 2001; Moje & Luke, 2009). The instrument was shared with three reviewers with expertise in literacy and/or identity research and revised based on their feedback in order to increase the content validity. The survey questions were presented to participants at the beginning of the study via Qualtrics and served to examine participants’ literacy identities and experiences. The survey included 50 questions, which were answered on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). Example practices include: “I feel confident that I know the current, positive literacy identities valued the social literacy experiences that served to shape their literacy identities. Additionally, results of the survey revealed that participants also held strong, positive literacy identities in higher education programs. In sharing their literacy stories, these two participants shared their experiences on their most memorable experiences, which focused on their early and recent experiences with literacy and did not include examples from the middle years 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 with her mean score as a 4.5 out of 5.5, but qualitative data captured during interviews also characterized her as a strong, confident reader and writer. Julie also described how she currently read and wrote and how she successfully navigated new identities as a doctoral student. The authors argue that Julie’s strong, confident literacy identities are grounded in literacy identity research (Gee, 2006; McCarthy, 2001; Moje & Luke, 2009) and sought to explore the relationship between participant’s literacy histories and their literacy identities. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to an hour and provided an opportunity to examine participant’s literacy stories. Interview data were audio recorded, and later transcribed. These stories were constructed as they shared and reflected upon their past experiences with reading and writing and how these experiences shaped their current experiences and identities. Questions included: How would you describe your literacy abilities? Describe your most memorable experiences in a classroom or school setting? What are some devices and symbols (Bustle, 2004). This tool (Shephard, 1993) was used as an additional representation of doctoral students’ literacy identities.

Each of these data pieces built upon each other, creating layers of data sources. The surveys provided a framework to examine past literacy experiences and helped researchers to determine which participants had positive experiences and positive literacy identities. The interview added depth and understanding, telling a story of how and why these identities were formed. Finally, the visual literacy tool revealed the participants’ perceptions of their literacy identities through a different medium, while building upon and expanding their literacy stories.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the mean scores of the survey responses. The reliability of the survey was .84 according to Chronbach’s alpha. The qualitative data from the interviews were coded and analyzed using constant comparison analysis (Straus & Corbin, 1990). To create a baseline for coding and analysis, the four researchers coded one interview individually. Researchers then discussed the codes and analyzed emerging themes found in the data, resulting in six themes. Following discussion and analysis, the six initial descriptive themes (Pilleis & Hubberman, 1994) were collapsed into past literacy experiences, present literacy experiences, support systems and social experiences. 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 survey revealed that participants also held strong, positive literacy identities in higher education programs. In sharing their literacy stories, these two participants shared their experiences on their most memorable experiences, which focused on their early and recent experiences with literacy and did not include examples from the middle years of their literacy identity development. A description of each case follows.
Julie’s social learning stretched beyond face-to-face interactions. “Blogs, Twitter, Google docs,” this is another clear indication of her technology blog. Around the computer were the words with an iPad beside her (see Figure 1).

The assignments we have when you have to read someone else’s work, that’s always helpful too because someone else will think of things so that 1 will never have thought of.” 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 their learning and growing 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 to get out the there and make some connections with other educators and teacher educators. … I do a lot of reading in 400 characters or 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 let you just… you put your face out there… has helped me in the field.” Julie used the Internet as a tool for writing and sharing her knowledge. 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 kind of 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 with an iPad beside her (see Figure 1). This image was another indication of the various ways in which she values and engages with technology in her social literacy experiences as referenced in her discussion of her technology blog. Around the computer were the words “blogs, Twitter, Google docs.” This is another clear indication that Julie’s social learning stretched beyond face-to-face interactions 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 the library. She also valued some of these experiences translated into 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.” Julie 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 had shared literacy experiences within her family, reading with her sister and mother, and receiving writing feedback from both her parents. Dad would read my papers before I would turn them in… so he was like your first grade… so it was just cool having the two of them to always go over your writing. As far as writing, my mom 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 Julie’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 Julie feel more confident in herself as a writer. She also valued being read aloud to when she was growing up, “As soon as you learned to read, you know, I just find the more people I’ve written with, it’s gotten much more concise… with my professor now, he’s always been a much better writer than me, so I’ll always take his feedback. This example shows that collaboration with professors was important to Julie in her writing process. When asked how her writing had changed since entering the doctoral program, Julie shared, “I think it is more sophisticated than it was…. All the feedback I’ve gotten, that’s very helpful.” Julie’s writing was nurtured as her parents initially provided feedback, and later she built a relationship with a professor who provided feedback as well. Julie attributed her success and positive identity as a writer to these social literacy experiences.

**Discussion**

In considering the importance of literacy as a social experience and examples of ways that this is socially produced in her writing, 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 feedback from professors in the doctoral program. Both participants saw themselves as confident and current writers (Perez, 1998). Next, we share common themes across the two participants that held these positive literacy identities and compared them to the different spaces where social literacy was and is important for them. It does not come as a surprise that doctoral students have positive literacy identities and literacy histories, however, survey data revealed that many doctoral students did not have positive literacy identities and histories (Adams-Budde, Howard, Jaloff, & Myers, 2014). For this reason, we chose to highlight two participants that held these qualities in order to examine how their previous experiences shaped the development of positive self-perceptions and providing these experiences for all students.

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as their bedroom growing up, they continue to talk about and share books with each other.

Moreover, the curricular space of her social literacy learning occurs with her children 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 McEwin (2010) suggest both the physical and online spaces are intertwined and embedded in broader social practices.

**IMPLICATIONS**

As students are said to construct 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 various lenses of instruction and learning. Because identities are social constructs (Hall, et al., 1998), classrooms can play an active role in the development of individuality, identity, and learning. 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, it is believed 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.

In the context of higher education, the data illustrate the need to provide opportunities for students to use collaboration, communication and discussion of reading and writing in the nature of social literacy learning. Research suggests that classroom structures should foster an environment where students can read and write together and share multiple perspectives that cause them to think critically about these issues. As a result, this study generated an understanding of 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 their experiences of their literacies. In addition, this study can provide insight into the types of literacies that are valued in various contexts. Despite these limitations and opportunities for future research, this study addresses a gap in the literature that focuses on the combined fields of literacy and identity by linking these students with success with doctoral students. This study underscores the need for educational institutions to examine doctoral students' literacy learning and identity development in light of research that has shown that supporting doctoral students who are interested in the field of literacy and identity can be beneficial. Therefore, university instructors need to be able to value the experiences of all students as they continue to explore instructional decisions that positively shape students’ literacy identities.

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