

9-1-2002

## Learning from Others: Literacy Perspectives of Middle-School English Teachers

Cynthia A. Lassonde  
digitalpublishing@library.wisc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/networks>

Part of the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Lassonde, Cynthia A. (2002) "Learning from Others: Literacy Perspectives of Middle-School English Teachers," *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research*: Vol. 5: Iss. 3. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2470-6353.1190>

This Full Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

# Learning from Others: Literacy Perspectives of Middle-School English Teachers

by *Cynthia A. Lassonde*

---

Cynthia A Lassonde teaches 5th grade at Schoharie Elementary School in Schoharie, New York, USA. She is also a doctoral student in the Reading Program of the State University of New York at Albany, NY.

---

## Abstract

At the center of this interview-based study, middle-school English teachers talk and write about their literacy development, their teaching philosophies, and their curriculum, as they reflect upon their teaching. Portraits of their perspectives of literacy emerge. Using these portraits to reflect upon teaching practices, the author suggests we can effectively examine our own educational philosophies, contributing to our efforts to become increasingly competent educators.

---

## Introduction

The school years begin and end; the students come and go. Each leaves an impression upon me--teaching me, changing me, and offering me opportunities for new experiences and knowledge. As a middle-school English teacher, I value the lessons I have learned from my students. Yet, I regret that I haven't created more opportunities for myself to learn from my teaching peers. Conversations I have had with teachers in my building are frequently superficial, such as passing comments about day-to-day teaching events. Prevaillingly, time is consumed with the duties of planning curriculum, preparing lessons, and correcting papers. Although I am aware of the benefits of collaboration and use this approach as a major component in working with my students, I tend to isolate myself within the confines of my classroom and my daily teaching duties.

Attempting to reconcile this neglect, I decided to purposely examine the learning and teaching experiences of two middle-school teachers from the school district in which I teach. The purpose of this study was to learn from these teachers by comparing their literary perspectives to my own. When I began this study, I wondered what I could learn about my teaching practices by talking to fellow middle-school English teachers about theirs. Three dimensions to this adventure took form. The first dimension is represented as the teachers tell their own stories and describe their educational philosophies. Personal reflections about my philosophy of teaching as related to the teachers' responses in this study add a second dimension. Readers are invited to create a third dimension by contemplating their own experiences and reflecting upon their own practices.

## Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the theoretical framework that the world in which we live may be viewed as a social web, meaning we learn who we are and who we are *not* partially through other people. As we encounter new situations, meet and talk with people, and envision ourselves in comparison to others, we develop and change (Demo, 1992). Therefore, we could say that our identities are socially constructed. Theories related to this statement are constructivism and identity.

According to the principles of constructivism, learners build meanings or make sense of experiences using what they already know as a basis (Tobin, 1991). New ideas are assimilated in a variety of ways by different people, depending upon their background experiences. Prior understandings become the foundation for new conceptualizations as learning takes place by connecting to the knowledge, experience, and concepts that pre-exist in the learner's mind. The prior understandings of the teachers participating in this study, therefore, are the foundations for their current educational philosophies. These teachers continue to construct knowledge as their teaching experiences develop. As this knowledge grows, the participants also rebuild and renegotiate their identities as educators. This leads us to look at theories behind identity construction.

According to Hull (2000), acquiring an identity involves "acquiring a sense of social position" (p. 3). The infinitive form of identity-- to identify-- helps me distinguish identity as the way people identify with multiple social groups. I think of identity as the social presentation of who the person is or how the person wants to be seen by others. People try out and take on roles and memberships according to particular contexts. When Bruner (1990) wrote of identity, he argued that not only is identity culturally and socially negotiated but that when people talk about their own actions they, in essence, justify and construct themselves.

Who people are, who they think they are, who they don't want to be, and who they want to become are all muddled up inside them all of the time. Identity should really be referred to in plural form ...*identities*... because people are constantly reshaping who they are based on their experiences. In one instance of time, one person can play multiple roles. Identity formation is a recursive, dynamic process.

When Agee (2001) studied high-school English teachers' literature instruction, she noted the importance of considering teachers' identities and perspectives. Her findings indicate that understanding the intersection of teachers' public (school) and personal convictions and beliefs will illuminate studies of teaching practice and pedagogy. As with students, teachers' prior experiences inside and outside of school ultimately shape their philosophies. Agee writes that "teachers bring their own funds of knowledge from diverse settings to bear on pedagogy" (p. 5). With this in mind, by reading about the experiences of these teachers, we will not only explore their prior knowledge and how it affects their teaching; but we will also add to our own foundations of experience and knowledge.

Looking through this theoretical lens of the world as a social web that helps us construct who we are, I focused on the value of talking with other teachers who share similar experiences with me,

such as teaching middle-school English. Defining, distinguishing, enhancing, and improving myself supports my growth as an effective teacher. Just as we encourage our students to learn from each other, I wondered how teachers could do the same. How can the use of literacy to gain valuable insights help us become highly competent teachers? Literacy can be defined as a social practice through which learners become apprentices to particular group memberships (Scribner & Cole, 1981). By sharing experiences with others, we open the opportunity to learn and to become ever-evolving teacher apprentices. As Langer (2001) found in her study of excellence in English education, when colleagues create and maintain communities of personal networks to share and connect with each other, teaching is nourished.

My guiding question going into the interviews was

What will I learn about my teaching practices by talking to fellow middle-school English teachers about theirs?

## **Methods**

### **The Site and the Participants**

The participants, Joan and Sonya, are both teachers at the middle-school level. Joan is a 41-year-old European-American in her first year of full-time teaching. She is a sixth-grade Language Arts teacher. Sonya, a 25-year-old Hispanic woman, is currently in her third year of teaching. She teaches Speech and Drama, eighth-grade English, and high-school Academic Intervention Services in Reading. When we talked, we focused on her role as an eighth-grade English teacher.

The two participants were chosen for specific reasons. I am a fifth-grade Language Arts teacher, and I was interested in exploring the ideas and methods of other teachers at the middle-school level. I hoped to be able to use this experience as a way of reflecting on my beliefs and practices and to be able to observe similarities and differences between teachers with varied literacy backgrounds and philosophies.

The research site is a rural school in which grades kindergarten through 12 are located on one campus in two connected buildings. Kindergarten through grade 6 inhabit one building, and grades 7 through 12 are housed in the other. There are approximately 100 students per grade level with an overwhelming majority of the students being of European-American ancestry.

The research site is my hometown school district and the district in which I work. My three daughters also attend this school. Although none of my daughters has had the current sixth-grade teacher in their school careers, my middle daughter is currently enrolled in the eighth-grade teacher's English class. I knew both of these teachers prior to asking them to participate; however, I would not consider our relationship close. I mention all of this because I think it is only fair to the reader to be critical of any biases I may unintentionally reflect in my perceptions. As Florio and McVee (2000) propose, "...the work of understanding and describing others' lives is inevitably mediated by our own autobiographies" (p. 160).

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

The teachers were contacted initially by a letter explaining that I wanted to interview them. In the letter I included the protocol questions (see Appendix) and requested they suggest dates and times they might be available for such an interview. Upon receipt of their positive responses, I scheduled separate interviews with each. No monetary reimbursement was made for participation.

On the days of the interviews I brought copies of the questions and audiotape recording equipment to capture my conversations with the teachers. Using protocol questions as a foundation, the conversational tone of the interviews at times lent itself to further questioning to clarify or expand responses. Each interview took about 45 minutes. Each teacher was asked whether or not she preferred I use her real name or a pseudonym in the study. This article reflects their decisions.

After the interviews, the tapes were transcribed in full, and a draft of my interpretation and analysis was prepared. Three months later, I asked the teachers to read and verify the draft of my interpretation of their interviews and respond in writing to a short-answer questionnaire extending issues brought up during the interviews. This data was added to the oral interviews.

Analysis of the data consisted of comparative analysis of the participants' responses (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I carefully studied each teachers' response to similar questions, jotting down overriding issues, such as contextualizing versus decontextualizing instruction, and coding evidence of personal experiences with literacy, goals for teaching, goals for their students, personal goals, philosophy of teaching, and specific teaching practices. I frequently had to "[wave] the red flag" (p. 97) on my emotions because I kept finding myself portraying the approaches with which I agreed in more positive ways than those I did not favor. Although I agree with Strauss and Corbin that it is not possible to be completely free of bias in data analysis, I did have a familiarity with my feelings and preferences, at least with those of which I was aware. Journal editors also made me aware of places in my drafts through which my bias was shining, and these sections were rewritten.

## **Results**

### **Joan: Sixth-Grade Language Arts Teacher**

Growing up, Joan told me, she "...used to sit in the bathroom at 10 o'clock at night reading books 'cause my sister made me turn the lights off [in the bedroom]. I used to read under the covers with a flashlight. I was constantly reading." Types of books she liked to read included fairy tales, fantasy, and science fiction. Although Joan remembers her father "...was a TV person," Joan's mother read some. There were always books in the house. At home while growing up, Joan remembers that she kept a daily journal, which she found very cathartic. "I'd write when I was angry with my sister: 'Life isn't fair!'" In school, Joan "lived in the library" spending her free periods helping out in library club. Joan remembers how her seventh-grade teacher inspired her to write by making it seem "free." This cherished teacher led Joan to feel and believe that "writing wasn't wrong if you were expressing your opinion." Joan remembers this teacher

stressed the mechanics and the freedom of writing. She was encouraged to share what she had learned from her reading as well.

Joan continues to read and write in her personal life. Following the strong lead of his mother, now Joan's son is an avid reader as well and "...takes books everywhere." The family has an extensive library of books around the house and subscribes to numerous magazines, such as *Time For Kids* and teaching magazines. Joan spends much of her free time reading about Tourette syndrome because her son is afflicted with the condition. She gathers information from books and off the Internet. Lately, Joan tells me she has been reading as much as she can find about classroom management.

Joan shared college experiences with me. For one of her teaching courses, Joan was assigned to write a book. She chose to write about her son. Using photographs, this children's book ended up being quite helpful in explaining her son's condition to his classmates. The book explained what Tourettes is and justified behaviors, such as panic attacks, that the students had been witnessing in Joan's son. Joan stated that after the teacher read this book to the class, students demonstrated more tolerance toward her son than they had previously. As Joan explained, her son "...was accepted because [his classmates] understood him more."

Joan's creative writing skills again proved invaluable during her student teaching internship in a fifth-grade classroom. Joan searched for a book that described the expansion that occurred in America in the Age of Exploration. Because she couldn't find exactly what she needed all in one source, she decided to write her own book. "I had a great time doing it," she declared with a proud smile. The book contains progressive overlays illustrating expansion with thorough explanations. Joan hopes to get it published some day.

When asked to describe her personality traits, Joan wrote that she believes her experiences with her son and Tourettes has made her very easygoing. She has learned to address priority issues, such as safety and respect, first. From the first day of school, she stresses respect. "I expect raising hands to speak, an acceptable tone of voice when speaking, respecting others' opinions, self, and property; but most of all, self-respect." Joan sees herself as having a great deal of enthusiasm and loves sharing that enthusiasm with children. This affects her teaching because when she gets excited about learning something new, the class seems to pick up that excitement also.

This is Joan's first year of full-time teaching. She graduated from a state college with a bachelor's in Elementary Education in December of 1999 and substituted for a semester in a number of schools before taking this teaching position in a sixth-grade classroom. The other teaching experience that Joan has is her involvement in a summer program for children ages 5 to 12. She helped design and taught the program. Joan told me, "...I tried to include some educational aspects and arts and crafts.... We talked about the different countries....We read fairy tales....We did a travel journal...." This experience seems to fit with Joan's philosophy that becoming literate should be enjoyable for students. "Children should learn through experiences as much as possible."

Joan also believes that teachers have to help students build a foundation of knowledge and writes that if students learn basic skills well by second grade, the rest of the grades will be easier for them. Her philosophy is that new information builds on what they already know so the primary grades are extremely important.

Then we talked about Joan's current teaching position. The role of the sixth-grade Language Arts teacher in this school district is to teach writing, grammar, and spelling. There is a Reading teacher at this grade level as well, who teaches literature (reading) and vocabulary. Periods are 40 minutes long, and Joan teaches five classes per day.

Joan expressed that her frustration with the writing that her students have been showing her. In September she had the students start a journal in which they wrote in a variety of genres: free writes (students just wrote about anything they chose to write about, in any style), poems, song lyrics, summaries of articles, and class reviews (students explained what they were learning that week in any class about which they chose to write). Joan expressed frustration not in the quality or the content of the writing but with the fact that many students let themselves "fall behind" and weren't doing the assignments at all. This is how Joan described an assignment relating to newspaper articles summaries:

We've been doing news articles. I made up a who, what, when, where, why, and how [sheet]. Then we'd read the news article together and as we read it, they underlined the who, what, when, where, why, and how. We did it together on the board, and then they took home the list and wrote out a summary. About 80% of them are getting the summaries in, using the information I gave them; but about 20% are still not getting it in. So we're gonna break it down a little bit more and keep doing it again and again and again until they get it.

Joan plans to assign the students to write reports on the ancient civilizations in the near future. For this task, Joan sees gathering information as a necessary skill, which she has students practice by reading and summarizing "Minipages" from the local newspaper. These are weekly inserts written about current events at an elementary level. Joan says the students enjoy reading these inserts.

Further frustration was expressed by Joan when we talked about homework assignments. "I'm getting the papers back, but they aren't done!" The papers she showed me were fill-in-the-blank-type grammar and short answer sheets. When students don't get their work in, she either keeps them in for recess, calls the parent, requests parent's signature on the assignment, or keeps the student after school. "I'm here all the time, and it's eating up my time. I told them it's not fair 'cause I'm putting more effort into it than they are. I told them I'm backing off and making them responsible." Joan expressed frustration with "unsupportive" parents.

Then Joan's frustration switched to the students' skills. "They're not getting the verbs and the nouns. That's what we've been doing for the last week." I was shown more worksheets with the subjects underlined once and the predicate twice. To try something new, Joan was introducing a Shel Silverstein poem in today's parts-of-speech lesson. She planned to help the students underline the nouns and the verbs.

When asked what her goals in reading and writing were for her students this year, Joan said, "I want them to be able to write a coherent sentence. Part of what I'm seeing in their writing is that they might follow the directions, but I'm still getting 'he seen the turtle.' So, we're working on verb tenses."

Teaching methods that have been successful for Joan so far seem to be lessons in which "we got some good conversation." Joan introduced a song lyric by Britney Spears for the students to interpret. "They loved the connection between a modern song and the message. We went line by line and talked about 'what does it mean here?'...Kids who normally sit back and play with their pencils were raising their hands."

Although Joan told me she does not keep a formal teaching log in which to reflect on her practices, she does review her lessons at the end of every day to determine if she could have done something differently and to inform the next day's lesson. She asks herself if the class learned what she was trying to teach; and if they didn't, what could she do differently. When she has students who aren't doing well, she wrote that she tries to find another way to teach the information they need until they understand it. She states she is always looking for new ways to teach as effectively as possible.

For this year, Joan was assigned a mentor teacher who teaches at the same grade level. When asked how this has helped her, Joan stated that it had been helpful to have her mentor to talk to when she is unsure of a procedure or if she was having difficulty with a child. Actually, Joan says, "I talk to her about everything."

As frustrated as she says she feels these days, Joan still insisted that she loves teaching Language Arts. Plans for this year include using the computers and looking at multicultural texts. "If I get time..."

### **Sonya: Eighth-Grade English Teacher**

Sonya attributes her literacy to two people: her mother and herself. Her mother always encouraged Sonya and her sister to read and she read to them each night. Sonya was always a "bookworm." On summer vacations, she read into the late hours of the night. She read everything she could get her hands on and cried when she didn't have a new book to read or couldn't get to the library. While growing up, she was on the school newspaper and had some poetry published. She remembers learning to read through a phonics approach.

After graduating from a private college with a bachelor's degree in English and a minor in education and drama, Sonya continued on to graduate school. While working part-time as a Speech and Drama and an eighth-grade English teacher, she earned a master's degree in English from a state college in 1998. Sonya explained that she wanted to get her master's in English because, "...if it didn't work out in teaching I wanted to go into publishing." Although she always wanted to teach, she had interests in publishing and theater. She plans to return to college soon for a doctorate in writing composition.



In her personal life, Sonya says she reads "everything and anything." Over the past summer, she read adolescent novels to "catch up on them. I felt I wasn't very versed in some of the younger writers like Christopher Pike, R. L. Stine. These are the authors that [my students are] reading." Sonya also selects books from best-seller lists or books from her graduate lists that she never got to read. She states that she likes to read books by "minority writers" because she has a diverse ethnic background. While growing up and even while in college, her teachers assigned many Anglo-Saxon writers. In an effort to "get an understanding of" her own culture, Sonya said she has been exposing herself to a variety of writers of diverse ethnic backgrounds. "I'm not really searching for anything. I don't know much about the background of my own culture, and I'm just interested in it."

When asked to describe her personality, Sonya wrote that she sees herself as energetic, open-minded, and sensitive.

These [personality traits] have been assets in my classroom teaching. To teach effectively, a teacher has to maintain a sense of humor and have more enthusiasm and energy than her students. I am responsible for opening the minds of over 100 eighth-grade students, five days a week, 40 minutes a day. This is not an easy task. When the kids see I am enthusiastic about what we are learning, they maintain a more positive attitude about the work we are doing in the classroom. Every teacher also needs to be open-minded in the classroom, especially when you are teaching sensitive material in the classroom. Sometimes my sensitivity is my downfall. It is easy to take things personally. This could be a student that criticizes you or a lesson that goes bad. Sometimes you feel like a failure but I tell myself that out of 180 days of teaching a year, you will have good and bad days, but this does not make you a failure.

Based on her philosophy of teaching, Sonya believes everyone has the ability and the right to learn. This includes learning to read. Teachers are obligated to do everything in their power to help students read to the best of their ability and to understand the importance of reading in their lives. Sonya writes that she thinks George W. Bush's plan to make reading a priority in our schools and in our lives is right on target, and she supports his endeavors.

Sonya said that she would be more well-rounded as a teacher if past teachers had offered more multicultural literature. "It's not until you're in the classroom that you realize what the kids are reading, what's being taught, and what you'd like to be taught." Sonya believes multicultural literature should be offered to students at an early age, especially in a school where there aren't many minorities. In her classroom, she introduces multicultural literature with short stories and poetry. Right now there aren't any class sets of books offering varieties of cultures.

Eighth-grade English is very writing intensive. Students do journal writing in seventh grade, so Sonya doesn't emphasize that genre in eighth grade. To respond to literature they have read, Sonya gives the students an issue and asks them to think critically about it. She asks them to connect their personal lives with the characters from their readings. She tries to focus on a reader-response level of reflection. "We try to bring real-life issues in from the outside world into the classroom and the book....[W]hen you do that it helps them relate to the characters and the book more." This is how Sonya responded about homework:

Sometimes when you give them a writing assignment they think, "Oh, this is just a homework assignment" or "just a filler," but I try to get them to understand the value of writing and its purpose.

When asked if she could give an example of what she meant by *critical thinking*, Sonya responded:

In the book we're reading right now, I'm having them look at round characters: characters that during the course of the novel develop physically, emotionally, or mentally. I ask the kids first to explain two changes their character has gone through as a character and then think about ways they've changed in their own lives and similarities and differences they find with the character. Then they put all that into an essay to tie together things from the book and things from their own life.

As a teacher, Sonya's goals include improving her own teaching. She thinks there are still many things to learn and she plans to do so by observing other teachers to see what's going on in their classrooms, asking for suggestions, and having others sit in to observe her classes. She says she loves criticism because it makes her a better teacher. To reflect on her teaching, Sonya often consults with the Resource teacher, with whom she shares her classroom, and asks for feedback on her lessons. Sonya portrays the Resource teacher as "very open and honest and always willing to provide suggestions." As another form of reflection, Sonya keeps a log of all of her lessons where she writes her objectives, assessments, and suggestions to herself. Interestingly, Sonya puts this log away at the end of the year and does not refer to it in the following year. She insists that she likes to try out new ideas every year.

Concerning the state standards, Sonya thinks what is really important is "not teaching to the test, but teaching them how to master the skills that make up the standards along with teaching them that reading and writing are fun." She wants them to leave her classroom at the end of the school year wanting to pick up a book on their own because they want to read it.

Sonya thinks students get the impression that literacy involves "you stand up there and read a book and they give you a writing assignment." In her classes, Sonya tries to make reading and literature realistic. Sonya expressed the following thoughts about the writing experience.

Just the wonder of having a writer sit down and write out a novel...that's a talent...and I want the kids to think at the end of the school year that they have that potential. ... If you have a piece of writing and it's grammatically wrong it doesn't mean that it's bad. When [the teacher] gives you back your paper... it's your piece of writing.... I want them to realize that writing is never finished. I want students to understand that even through the process of revision they always have control of their own writing.

Sonya feels that probably the most important skills she teaches every year are grammar, revision, and the writing process. She teaches the same skills to the entire class even though she is aware the students are at different levels and have various abilities. To meet individual needs, Sonya works individually with students on areas of need and to see how they are applying the skills she teaches.

Sonya says the practice of literature circles has been the most successful kind of teaching for her. In these circles, she has small groups of students reading novels different from the other groups and working together to complete projects about the novels. If students are working in the "right group," they are motivated to work with each other. Reflecting on "the nicest lessons," Sonya says it's the ones that, "I go in really structured but I leave a lot of room for anything [to] happen." She would rather the class got into a great discussion than do the worksheet she had planned. She thinks students get more out of discussions than worksheets. This year she feels more comfortable than she has in the past about leaving room for unexpected discussions because as she says, "You never know!"

Pleased to report that every year students seem to come in with a "higher level of thinking," Sonya agrees that it is a difficult age group with which to work because they are going through so much.

The classroom is the last place they want to be. To have these kids at 12 or 13 thinking and observing things about the outside world and being able to talk, write, and apply them in the classroom is wonderful.

## Discussion and Analysis

Both Joan and Sonya are hard-working, dedicated teachers, who use reflection and collaboration to continuously try to improve their own practices. Prior knowledge contributes to their literacy perspectives: literary successes in childhood, positive experiences with literature and writing in school, publishing aspirations for their writing, and their teaching experiences. Growing up in families supportive of literacy practices, these teachers offer their students their love of reading and writing and share their literary values daily. Literature plays an important role in their lives as they read widely for entertainment, to gather information, to gain knowledge, and to explore new worlds. To improve their teaching, Sonya has been catching up on adolescent novels while Joan has been expanding her knowledge of classroom management. These teachers enjoy reading for its aesthetic and efferent experiences (Rosenblatt, 1994).

Interestingly, publishing and being published are highly valued by both teachers. I find it interesting that they both see this as an obtainable goal. They both stated that they want their students to believe that being published is achievable for them also. Sonya mentioned this when talking about being a writer, and Joan encouraged her students to write for the newspaper.

In their classrooms, Sonya and Joan are encouraged by good conversations. They recognize differences in engagement when students are interested in their work and recognize how choice positively affects student motivation. Students' interpretations of text are upheld in sixth- and eighth-grade English classes. Finally, both teachers expressed a desire to incorporate multicultural texts into their curriculum, seeing it as an important door to open for children.

There are a number of characteristics that distinguish Sonya and Joan from each other. There are many factors that *could* be influencing their teaching philosophies and practices: their teacher training, their ages, their ethnicity, their marital status, their gender, and their class, to name a few. However, we can only speculate and question unless we carry out further study. In my

opinion, it would be difficult and unfair to compare these teachers as they are unique individuals who come to teaching with different experiences. It is not the purpose of this study to evaluate the teaching philosophies or methods of these teachers but rather to consider what I could learn about my teaching practices by talking to them about theirs. These teachers are at contrasting points in their careers and their lives. So, as I look at the following variables, it is not to compare Sonya and Joan, but rather to encourage readers to use these queries to think about their own teaching.

Joan and Sonya have differing opinions of how English curriculum should be taught. They each have varying degrees of understanding of learning theories. Joan uses an approach that breaks writing down into separate skills, such as identifying nouns and verbs, writing a coherent sentence, and practicing grammar skills with fill-in-the-blank worksheets. While reading poetry, Joan went over the meaning of a poem line by line with them to determine its meaning in one instance and used another poem as a skills lesson. Joan also stressed practicing skills over and over again until the students get them right. Joan's assignments for the most part are skills lessons that the students perform in isolation or in a decontextualized manner.

Sonya, on the other hand, wants the students to see the whole picture and, as described in her explanation of critical literacy, she wants students to be able to discuss the meanings of a text as they relate to their own real-life situations. Her focus is on broad concepts of literacy and ways to get students engaged in learning through a range of experiences with books and language. She would prefer the class to take over with meaningful conversations about text than to do planned assignments. She expressed this in the interview when she described how she'd rather hold meaningful discussions with the class than stick to planned worksheet assignments. Sonya would prefer the students to feel *they* are the authorities of the text. Sonya wants her students to understand and become engrossed in their assignments. Even though opportunities existed in the context of the interview, she did not express any frustrations with students' homework efforts the way Joan did. She seemed to be satisfied with students' homework efforts. Sonya provides opportunities for student voice to "sound and be heard" (Lensmire, 2000, p. 57). Furthermore, Sonya involves critical literacy and cooperative learning experiences in her teaching as a way to make the class motivating, engaging, pertinent, and meaningful. This is clearly expressed in her responses when she says that she wants reading and writing to become life-long habits for the children and believes that, for that to happen, children must experience school literacy practices that are enjoyable.

Although Joan's teaching responsibilities focus on writing, spelling, and grammar, opportunities to make connections to other content areas, particularly to reading, are possible. Remember, Sonya teaches eighth-grade English, which connects reading and writing. Joan teaches sixth-grade Language Arts, but there is also a sixth-grade Reading teacher. At first glance, one might think that Sonya has more opportunities than Joan to connect reading and writing, which would substantially influence *how* each teaches. However, I propose that just because Joan's focus is on writing, this does not mean her curriculum has to exclude reading. Numerous possibilities of collaboration with the other sixth-grade teachers exist, such as reading and writing about ancient civilizations, as Joan reports she plans to do. I know this because I am intimately aware of the sixth-grade curriculum having taught Language Arts at that grade level myself for four years and having had three children of my own pass through the grade. Writing across the curriculum is a

whole field of study that taps into the connection of contextualized readings with knowledge-building writing opportunities (i.e., Cooper & Odell, 1999). Joan might also connect writing to short pieces of reading more frequently, as she reports having done with song lyrics and current events. While Joan and Sonya's teaching environments do differ, perhaps a broader view of contextualized writing would direct Joan's instruction toward a connected, authentic approach.

In the analysis of data, a degree of contradiction became evident when coding evidence of Joan's teaching philosophy. When Joan spoke about her philosophy directly and when she gave practical examples of ways her philosophy was reflected in her classroom practices, I noted dissonance in her thinking. Philosophically, Joan stated that becoming literate should be meaningful and fun for students. She supported this philosophy with an example concerning the way she set up her summer program as a travel adventure. Further on, however, she talked about assigning grammar worksheets, which she reported the sixth-graders do not complete. I would propose that perhaps the students are not doing the work because they are not enjoying that form of learning. Possibly, Joan was attempting to present herself in the interview as the idealized teacher she wants to become, yet she has not quite determined how to become that teacher. Her use of the Silverstein poem to teach parts of speech is evidence of this emerging identity. Joan is trying a different approach to engage the students.

Sonya and Joan exhibit differences in their teaching styles and expectations. How can Joan find a teaching style that will help her make her students feel as "free" as she did when she was in seventh grade? At this point in her first year of teaching, Joan is expressing frustration. She doesn't know what to do next. Her responses to my questions focused on students' faults and external factors, such as lack of parental support, contributing to unsuccessful learning. How does this affect her effectiveness as a teacher? Sonya told me that she loves criticism and expressed how helpful it has been to improving her teaching.

## **Reflection**

Interviewing Sonya and Joan has caused me to reflect upon my teaching practices. As I pondered the situations of Joan and Sonya, I couldn't help but compare our literary upbringings and how my career has been affected by my family, education, and life experiences. Because I am a middle-school teacher, I found it enlightening to look at my beliefs and practices as compared to these teachers.

## **Myself as a Reader and Writer**

Like Sonya and Joan, my childhood, too, included a household that valued experiences with literature and writing. I still have old diaries from when I was in elementary school. Little tidbits of my life were packaged into private artifacts that contained my fears and dreams. I also still have books that were special to me growing up: my series of Lassie adventures and the Bobbsey twins.

As a writer, I, too, have sought publication. I accept freelance editing and writing jobs from educational publishers, and I have authored supplemental manuals and computer software.

Teaching has always been my career, and the publishing world has offered me opportunities to write and create. Academic and professional writing have dominated my writing practices lately.

As a reader, I am always reading something related to teaching, either something for a graduate course I'm taking or young adult novels to stay current with my students. I'm currently preparing for my doctoral dissertation, so reading and writing about literacy are foremost on my agenda.

My experiences and goals in this respect are not so very different from Sonya's and Joan's. We all love, and always have loved, reading and writing. We use literacy in purposeful and enjoyable ways and have had positive experiences with literacy.

### **Teaching Philosophy**

The area I thought showed the most contrast in my interviews with Sonya and Joan and that made me think the most about my own stance was that of teaching philosophy.

There are different ways of instructing. These interviews and the contrast in teaching philosophies I have described between Joan and Sonya have helped me step back and think about how variables in literacy education can affect teaching. For example, hearing Sonya talk about how she views personal reflections in her students' responses to their readings as critical tells me she wants her class work to be meaningful in shaping her students' identities. This is an element of critical literacy that I want to offer to my students as well.

I have come to value literacy instruction that encourages students and teachers to shape their ideas and evaluate ways of negotiating meanings for new situations (Wenger, 1998; Wortham, 2001). I see this as fostering life-long learning and personal growth that can be applied to workplace and academic contexts. I have come to think of learning as more than just gathering tidbits of knowledge. Learning involves positioning oneself in places of possibility and choosing how to participate in various socially and culturally constructed communities (Chaiklin & Lave, 1995; Holland, Lachiocotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). When learning is viewed as a process that employs positioning, classroom writing practices become contexts in which students are able to explore the possibilities of who they are (Newkirk, 1997) and to determine what type of learning is socially available (Chaiklin & Lave, 1995).

### **Teaching Practices**

The focus or centeredness of a classroom greatly affects instruction. Based on the information obtained through these interviews, Joan's classroom could be classified as teacher-directed. The evidence shows that hands must be raised to speak, lessons are done together on the board over and over again "until they get it," and the class went over song lyrics together line by line. Sonya, on the other hand, says literature circles have been most successful in her class and talks about getting into great discussions.

Where is the focus in my classroom? I always try to keep my focus on the student. I try to set up my classroom so that students read and write every day. Valuing student-centered and student-enabling approaches and curriculum, I try to plan lessons that are authentic, meaningful, and

enjoyable. I have always been enticed by workshop approaches (Graves, 1994) and have incorporated techniques, such as portfolios, into my classes. I must say I feel students sometimes still require structure, explicit guidelines, and clear expectations, so I make time for more structured approaches also. Although I don't think I crave control in a classroom, I do want to feel as if I can account for my students' learning in measurable ways. At times, I incorporate note-taking lectures and worksheets when I think they are appropriate for a particular context.

What about the use of contextualized versus decontextualized instruction? As described previously, Joan and Sonya's approaches in this area contrast each other. I strive to teach broad literacy concepts, such as using writing to think critically about issues, rather than breaking down skills, such as teaching the parts of speech in a decontextualized manner. I've always thought of teaching writing as similar to teaching music. When you read sheet music for a song, the individual notes all flow together and make sense. If I were to teach the individual notes of writing in a decontextualized manner, the students would have difficulty understanding the whole concept of being a writer who writes for a purpose for a particular audience or for more personal reasons.

Joan mentioned her awareness of classroom discourse when she talked about the students who typically never participated raising their hands during a lesson while Sonya similarly tells of her "sensitivity" in taking "things personally." She relates, "Sometimes I feel like a failure." As teachers, we all have those feelings from time to time. It helps that critical-teacher in me to understand that both of these dedicated professionals also struggle with participation issues, lesson quality, and failure. But, as Sonya suggests, "...this does not make [us] a failure" all of the time. Indeed it does not.

Relating my prior knowledge and experiences to those of Joan and Sonya has resulted in a new awareness of my teaching philosophy and approaches. It has caused me to think about and evaluate why I use various methods in my teaching and why I should consider revising some of my approaches. For example, in the future I shall strongly consider strategies such as collaborating with a co-teacher to re-evaluate my teaching the way Sonya does. Also, I shall reconsider what makes assignments meaningful to students.

I have found this process to be rewarding. In the busy-ness of the school day and the seclusion of my classroom, it is sometimes difficult to find time to share experiences with other teachers in fruitful ways. Taking the time to talk with Joan and Sonya and to think about how my philosophy aligns with theirs has helped me construct my identity as an educator. I am more keenly aware of why I value student-enabling and contextualized learning approaches through my conversations with Sonya and Joan. Analysis of the data collected has helped me clarify my beliefs and values, enabling me to refine my teaching productively.

## **Concluding Remarks**

I would like to conclude with a quote from John Dewey (1938) on reflection.

Keeping track is a matter of reflective review and summarizing, in which there is both discrimination and record of the significant features of a developing experience. To reflect is to

look back over what has been done so as to extract the net meanings which are the capital stock for intelligent dealing with further experiences. It is the heart of intellectual organization and of the disciplined mind. (p. 87)

By looking at the features of Sonya's and Joan's "developing experience[s]" (p. 87), we can acquire knowledge that will help us understand our future experiences, just as their pasts have affected their present pedagogical philosophies.

My hope is that through the reading of this article, readers have, perhaps, rearranged or constructed meanings of their own and have learned from others.

### Acknowledgments

Respect for their privacy and confidentiality constrain me from acknowledging the participants, for sharing their time and their stories with me; the reviewers, for adding depth to this writeup and for teaching me a great deal about writing for a professional journal; and my writing group, especially Christine Woodcock and Ilene Rutten, for lending their minds and talents. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Jane Agee and Dr. Peter Johnston of the University at Albany for their help with this study. Sincere thanks to all.

### References

1. Agee, J. (2001). *Theory, identity, & practice: A study of two high school English teachers' literature instruction*. [On-line]. Available: <http://cela.albany.edu/Agee2/main.html>
2. Anders, P. L., Hoffman, J. V., & Duffy, G. G. (2000). Teaching teachers to teach reading: Paradigm shifts, persistent problems, and challenges. In M. L. Kamil, P. B. Mosenthal, P. D. Pearson, & R. Barr (Eds.). *Handbook of Reading Research, Volume III* (pp. 719-742). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
3. Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
4. Chaiklin, S., & Lave, J. (Eds.) (1995). *Understanding practice: Perspectives on activity and context*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
5. Cooper, C. R., & Odell, L. (Eds.) (1999). *Evaluating writing: The role of teachers' knowledge about text, learning, and culture*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
6. Demo, D. H. (1992). The self-concept over time: Research issues and directions. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 18, 303-326.
7. Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Touchstone Books.
8. Florio-Ruane, S., & McVee, M. (2000). Ethnographic approaches to literacy research. In M. L. Kamil, P. B. Mosenthal, P. D. Pearson, & R. Barr (Eds.). *Handbook of Reading Research, Volume III* (pp. 153-162). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
9. Fouad, N. A., & Brown, M. T. (2001, February). *Role of race and social class in development: Implications for counseling psychology*. Paper presented at the conference on diversity at SUNY Albany's Counseling Psychology Department, Albany, NY.
10. Graves, D. (1994). *A fresh look at writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.



11. Holland, D., Lachiocotte, W., Jr., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (1998). Chapter 2: A practice theory of self and identity. In *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds* (pp. 19-46). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
12. Hull, G. (2000, November). *Dueling narratives of self: Silicon Valley assemblers meet the new work order*. A paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association. San Francisco, CA.
13. Langer, J. A. (Summer 2000). Excellence in English in middle and high school: How teachers' professional lives support student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 37(2), pp. 397-439.
14. Lensmire, T. J. (2000). *Powerful writing: Responsible teaching*. New York: Teachers College Press.
15. Newkirk, T. (1997). *The performance of self in student writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
16. Rosenblatt, L. M. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
17. Scribner, S., & Cole, M. (1981). *The psychology of literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
18. Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
19. Tobin, K. (1991). *Learning how to teach science*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southeastern Association for the Education of Teachers in Science, Stone Mountain, Georgia, 1991.
20. Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
21. Wortham, S. (2001). *Narratives in action: A strategy for research and analysis*. New York: Teachers College Press.

## Appendix

### Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your own early experiences with reading and writing.
2. How do you use writing in your current program?
3. Tell me about the reading and writing you do in your life now.
4. What are your goals for teaching reading and writing?
5. What teaching methods have been successful for you?