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Shaping our literate lives: Examining the role of literacy experiences in shaping positive literacy identities of doctoral students

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
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,
Identities are multiple, varied across time and context, and constantly redefined. In a recent definition of identities as “self understandings,” consider how these understandings of self change with new experiences as well as shifting understandings of past experiences. Identities are not just the sum of individuals, 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 in order to support 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 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 identities individuals construct, enact, and explore in various situations (Moje & Luke, 2009).

Moreover, educators and mentors one chooses to read, write, and discuss in different contexts (McCarthy & Moje, 2002). The reciprocal relationship between one’s identities and one’s literacy experiences and conversations lead, write, and discuss in various contexts (McCarthy & Moje, 2002). Therefore, one’s literacy identities can be understood as co-constructed and socially situated self-understandings of how one’s literacy identities shift and change 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

One’s sense of self, or identity, can be understood through stories (McAdams, 1993; McKinney & Giorgis, 2009) and visual representations (Adams-Budde, Howard, Jolliff, & Myers, 2014; Buzbey, 2004; Georgiakoupolou, 2007). Moreover, individuals choose one’s relationships through the telling of these stories and the creation of visual representations. (Bamberg, 2004; Mishler, 2004). Many researchers have used self-reported stories to explore literacy identities of a variety of participants, including classroom teachers, literacy specialists, and students (Compton-Lilly, 2013; Drake, Spillane & Hufferd-Ackles, 2001; McKinney & Giorgis, 2009). For example, in a study by Drake et al. (2001) participants shared common stories of continental literacy development at home and at school that shaped their personal and professional identities as classroom teachers. McKinney and Giorgis (2009) explored the ways four literacy specialists constructed their identities as writers and teachers of writing through interviews and writer autobiographies. In another study, Compton-Lilly (2013) used the stories shared by a student, Eve, to understand how her school literacy experiences shaped her literacy identities as well as her identity as a student. These studies align with and support Georgiakoupolou’s (2007) findings that both the telling and representation of identities is a productive means of documenting how identities take shape.

Doctoral Students’ Identity Development

Few studies have focused specifically on identity development of doctoral students (e.g., Adams-Budde, Howard, Jolliff, & Myers, 2011; Hall & Burns, 2009; Johnson, 2012; Kriner, Coffman, Adkisson, & Putman, 2015; Noonan, 2015). Both Noonan (2015) and Johnson (2012) report on the findings of self-studies where the researchers examine their own identity development as researcher and scholars while participating in an educational doctoral program. Hall and Burns (2009) use theories of identity to explore the role faculty mentoring plays as educational doctoral students navigate new identities as scholars. The authors argue that mentors must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to assist diverse doctoral students in developing productive identities as researchers. Finally, Kriner et al. (2015) found that the students benefited and appreciated the chance to take on the role of scholar in the classroom context and that these experiences provided participants the opportunity to develop their scholarly identities.

As noted in these studies, a strong scholarly identity can help students find success in doctoral programs. The development of scholarly identities during doctoral study is a complex process, one that is not always simple or simple-minded. While identity is critical to students’ development of scholarly identities, these studies focus only on students’ experience while in school and do not consider how students’ identities evolved 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 how one’s literacy identities are formed.

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 study research 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 four-hour interview 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. (2001) who prepared the students for the study. Each of these doctoral participants is involved in their Teacher Education Higher Education (TEHE) Ph.D. program at a university in the southeast region of the United States. All seventy-five 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, Eve and Julie (pseudonyms) who have been used to protect the identity of participants. These two individuals were selected over a group of students because their literacy history survey scores revealed that their past literacy experiences impacted their current, positive literacy identities, and their success and experiences in the Ph.D. program. In addition, these participants were the only students who captured the most experiences found 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 a 33 year-old, White, female. Prior to enrolling in the doctoral program, she worked as a classroom teacher. She used to carefully examine how the participants viewed their literacy histories and experiences and the relationship they held strong, positive literacy identities in higher education programs. In sharing their literacy stories, these two participants focus on their most memorable experiences, which were grounded in literacy identity research (Geoo, 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. Example questions included: How would you describe your literacy abilities? Describe your experiences with reading as a child and in school. These interviews were coded and analyzed using constant comparison analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To create a baseline for coding and analysis, the four researchers coded one interview individually. Researchers then met to discuss the findings. The discuss emerging themes found in the data, resulting in six themes. Following discussion and analysis, the six initial descriptive themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were collapsed into past literacy experiences, present literacy experiences, present literacy experiences, present literacy experiences, present literacy experiences, present literacy experiences, present literacy experiences, present literacy experiences, and each experience was measured 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 these doctoral students also held strong, positive literacy identities in higher education programs. In sharing their literacy stories, these two participants focused on their most memorable experiences, which were grounded in literacy identity research 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, but also the data from the interview. Julie characterized herself as a strong, confident reader and writer. Julie also described how she currently read and writing came easily to her and described how she had been socially supported throughout her early and present literacy experiences. Interview data revealed that Julie’s social literacy learning experiences occurred at an early age. She described how she always remained an avid reader and writer. Julie was also an avid reader and writer. Julie read and wrote with her parents to participate in this shared layers of data. 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 representations of language and experience data, as well as the survey data, complemented the qualitative data collected during the interviews, and provided additional insights into 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 Cronbach’s alpha. The qualitative data from the interviews were coded and analyzed using constant comparison analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To create a baseline for coding and analysis, the four researchers coded one interview individually. Researchers then met to discuss the findings. The discuss emerging themes found in the data, resulting in six themes. Following discussion and analysis, the six initial descriptive themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were collapsed into past literacy experiences, present literacy experiences, present literacy experiences, present literacy experiences, present literacy experiences, present literacy experiences, present literacy experiences, present literacy experiences, and each experience was measured 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 how similar discussions and feedback with 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 opportunities 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 my way I never would 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, teachers using technology, etc. Julie shared, “My blog has helped me to get out there and make some connections with other educators and teacher educators…. I also do a lot of reading in 4E characters because less.” In her blog, 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 her colleagues.

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 valued and extended her role as a writer through the communication and social learning 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 school. One of these experiences taught her adult life, just as Eve 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. I don’t do it now” the she would discussed 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 handwritten 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.

As a student, Eve’s literacy experiences and identity were defined by discussions in class, but even beyond those face-to-face interactions and online discussion boards and social media shared literary experiences were a key component to her identity formation. Literacy as a social experience continued for Eve in higher education. In her interview she discussed collaborating with one of her professors to write, “I just finished a research project with my professor, so of course we have to write up those findings… On the paper we just finished, [gave him my [future] review, he chopped it down to two pages, at which point I also think everything’s improved. I know you 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 Eve in her writing process. When asked how her writing had changed since entering the doctoral program, Eve shared, “I think it is much more sophisticated that it was… All the feedback I’ve gotten, that’s very helpful.” Eve’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 exchange, it is evident that Julie and Eve not only valued social learning, but also attributed these opportunities and positive identities to the time of the study, both participants saw themselves as confident, knowledgeable writers and readers. They both have published academic works, including book chapters and articles, which are indicators of strong literacy skills.
as their bedroom growing up, they continue to talk about and share books with each other.

In this study, the context 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 McMicken (2003) suggest that these two 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 collaboration and communication to foster social learning. As teachers, researchers, and parents work to include more social literacy experiences in middle and secondary classrooms, K-12 classroom social learning can be nurtured through several ways instructors can provide opportunities for social learning. Experiences that lead to positive literacy identities throughout school level, which begs the question of how to create and nurture these experiences to lead to positive literacy identities throughout school for students. This implies that students who even though they are not at a desk in their classroom, shared, positive, literacy experiences can take place anywhere.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study provides clear examples of the importance of literacy as a social experience. However, while reflecting critically and 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 was a part of the SoTL Forum 2008-2010, and includes several instructors who are able to read and write. These spaces can be created across grade levels, from elementary to secondary classrooms, and may serve to show students that even though they are not at a desk in their classroom, shared, positive, literacy experiences can take place anywhere.

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Ferris, L. (2008). The kinds of reading experiences that will serve to enhance the positive literacy identities of students including those who may one day pursue their doctoral degree. This article is based on the participants’ experiences that lead to positive literacy identities throughout school for students. These experiences may not look the same across all students. 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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