For this issue of Language Arts, we invited Dr. David Bloome and Dr. Arlette Willis, two internationally recognized literacy scholars, to participate in a conversation on discourse and language learning. Dr. Bloome is a former middle school and high school teacher. He is currently a Distinguished Professor of Teaching and Learning in the College of Education and Human Ecology at The Ohio State University where he is the director of the Center for Video Ethnography and Discourse Analysis, and co-director of the Columbus Area Writing Project. Dr. Bloome’s research draws from fields of sociolinguistics, anthropology, and literary perspectives of language and literacy learning. Four areas related to writing and reading education comprise Dr. Bloome’s current work: 1) the social construction of intertextuality as part of the reading, writing, and learning processes; 2) discourse analysis as a means for understanding reading, writing, and literacy events in and outside of classrooms; 3) narrative development among young children as a foundation for learning and literacy development in schools; and 4) students as researchers and ethno- graphicists of their own communities. Author or coauthor of 11 books and numerous journal articles and book chapters, Dr. Bloome also served as former president of NCTE and the National Conference on Research in Language and Literacy, was the former coeditor of Reading Research Quarterly, and is the founding editor of Linguistics and Education: An International Research Journal. In 2008, Dr. Bloome was inducted into the Reading Hall of Fame.

Dr. Arlette Ingram Willis received her PhD from The Ohio State University and is currently a professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, the division of Language and Literacy. Her publications include Teaching and Using Multicultural Literature in Grades 9–12: Moving Beyond the Canon (1998), Reading Comprehension Research and Testing in the US: Undercurrents of Race, Class, and Power in the Struggle for Meaning (2008); three coedited books: Multiple and Intersecting Identities in Qualitative Research (with B. Merchant, 2001); Multicultural Issues in Literacy Research and Practice (with G. Garcia, R. Herrera, & V. Harris, 2003); On Critically Conscious Research: Approaches to Language and Literacy Research (with M. Montovan, H. Hall, C. Hunter, L. Burke, & A. Herrera, 2008); and numerous refereed articles, book chapters, book reviews, and monographs. She also has served as coeditor (with David Bloome) of the NCTE Literacy Book Series and is coeditor (with Violet J. Harris) of the American Education Research Journal, Teaching, Learning, and Human Development section. Dr. Willis is President-Elect of the Literacy Research Association.

This excerpted conversation was recorded on November 20, 2012 and has been edited for publication. The full conversation is available as a podcast at http://www.ncte.org/journals/la/podcasts.
David Bloome: I thought I’d start with the phrase we were asked to discuss, “literacy learning and discourse,” but as I read that phrase, I became uncomfortable with it. I then took your book, On Critically Conscious Research (Wil- lis, Montavon, Hunter, Hall, Burke, & Herrera, 2008), down from my shelf, reread bits of it, and began to think about why I was unhappy with that phrase; it consists of two nouns that I don’t really think of as nouns. I really don’t think of “literacy learning” as a noun, and I don’t think of “discourse” as a noun. What I began to think about was that phrase, “literacy learning and discourse,” is most likely to be interpreted as something like what forms of discourse, what instructional discourses, can lead to literacy learning? This struck me as a problematic formulation. I don’t think things are that simple.

Arlette Willis: Give me an example of why you think it might be much more complex, and why perhaps these words should be verbs or adjectives.

David: When you think of “literacy learning” as a noun, it seems to be something to own, something you can accomplish, something you can have. Even if it’s a process, then it’s a process you can possess. If you can possess it, then you can exchange it for other kinds of capital, and so it becomes an economic item. It seems like if you had some kind of discourse, then you could exchange that for some kind of literacy learning, and then you’ve got a particular kind of exchange system in hand. I think this way of thinking about literacy, literacy learning, and discourse implies education as a particular kind of economic system, and I worry about the implied underlying economic metaphors here. At least as I see it, I don’t think of literacy as a thing in and of itself. That is, for me, the term “literacy” itself is a non sequitur; there are literacy practices and literacy events. This follows the work of Shirley Brice Heath and Brian Street; I see literacy learning as social practices and social events involving the non-trivial use of written language.

Arlette: Right.

David: But literacy, as a thing in and of itself, as a decontextualized set of cognitive, linguistic, and intellectual processes or skills, to me, is a problematic definition. It’s what Brian Street called an “autonomous model of literacy.” I think there are just too many empirical studies, ethnographic studies, and others, that have debunked the notion of an autonomous definition of literacy. This includes the research that many scholars did—Brian Street, Shirley Brice Heath, Michael Cole, Harvey Graff, Jenny Cook-Gumperz, Judith Green, Allan Luke, Ken Goodman, myself, and others in which we showed that an autonomous model is not a viable concept. This is, in part, what I took away from your book, On Critically Conscious Research, in which you were arguing, and I think convincingly so, that research—and not just research, but ways of conceptualizing and thinking about processes such as literacy learning and discourse—needs to be understood in terms of a nexus of various kinds of ideological processes. Did I understand what you were arguing for or get close?

Arlette: Yes, it’s an excellent restatement, and much more eloquent than mine, of what I’m arguing! I really see the processes as ongoing and constant, and used as my framework Patricia Hill Collins’s notion of a matrix. I’ve thought about that since then quite a bit, and a matrix or matrices are too solid for me. I think it’s much more fluid a process, much more organic, so I’ve begun to think of it more like an atom. There’s a central core and electrons and protons that spin around constantly; that’s how I see these processes. It’s all encompassing and it’s ongoing.

There’s a wonderful new book by H. Sammy Alim and Geneva Smitherman called Articulate while Black: Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the U.S. Everybody has talked about how charismatic a speaker President Obama is, but what I find most interesting, and part of what they address in this book, is his ability to go from one form of language event or use of literacy or communication style to another seamlessly. The most often used example, and you can find it on YouTube, is when he’s at Ben’s Chili Bowl in Washington, DC.
old-school funky, funky place that plays what they call in the District “Go-Go,” where the bass is so loud it just practically comes through your skull. As he pays for his meal or is attempting to pay for his meal, he says, “Naw, we straight.” This is the President of the United States who goes from being the President right into a very colloquial African American vernacular English term seamlessly, and then he goes back to being the President. Similarly, when he was being introduced, I can remember him walking through a crowd and someone spoke to him—I want to say it was in Punjabi, but it could have been in Urdu—and he instantly flowed into a different language. [Note: President Obama speaks Indonesian, specifically a dialect known as Bahasa—the academic or standard form of Indonesian.] President Obama speaks English and has limited fluency in Indonesian, Spanish, and American Sign Language (see Alim & Smitherman, p. 26). So there’s a lot going on there, but he’s not the only one who can do that.

I think what happens in schools is that we forget that kids do this, that literacy is communicating; it’s active, it’s alive. I have a graduate student who’s working with some preschoolers from Guatemala, and the general presumption is that when these children go to school, they’re Spanish-speakers. She actually goes to school with them to support their bilingual transition from Spanish to English, while the teacher works with them in English. In addition, she observes the children in their homes. She has learned that they speak an indigenous language, and she records how the children play with languages, combining ideas, words, intonations, as well as how they are inventing words as they code-switch among all three languages. Their indigenous language is neither Spanish nor English, yet they play with all three languages in their lives. When I think of notions of literacy, I think of the opportunity that we all have to flow in and out of these forms of communication. When I think of critically conscious research, I am troubled that researchers don’t see all of who these children are—children who can flow in and out of these kinds of language events. They only see what they’re looking for, unfortunately.

David: I think that you’re raising some really interesting questions, not only about researchers, but also about educators and teachers and classrooms in general. I think that some of this flows, not just from the limitations and how we might understand children, but also from some of the ideologies that we, in education, are caught by—that is, the ideologies that tend to dominate what we do in schools and classrooms. I think these ideologies, in some sense, flow from autonomous models of literacy. That is, they cause us to hold on to some binary oppositions, such as literate and illiterate. There are literate people and there are illiterate people; there are oral cultures and there are literate cultures; there is literate thought—and I guess the opposite of literate thought is illiterate thought or a-literate thought or non-literate thought. Then we need to problematize all of these sorts of binaries. Many, quite frankly, don’t exist; they’re non sequiturs when we start thinking of literacy not as a thing in and of itself but as different kinds of social practices situated within particular settings, and different kinds of social events also situated and that involve the non-trivial use of written language. These binaries make no sense from that kind of perspective, so, from that perspective, then, we can begin to ask questions like, What might be the repertoire of language and literacy practices and ways of participating in a variety of language and literacy events that children might be invited into? How might children develop the communicative competence to be part of those sorts of events?

To listen to the full conversation, please go to the podcast at http://www.ncte.org/journals/la/podcasts.

That leads us into thinking about how particular sets of literacy events and literacy practices might evolve, might be adapted, and might be changed in ways that could better prepare teachers to help students engage in practices and learn how to adapt practices in ways that move beyond a simply passive stance toward the use of written language. I’ve been privileged to be able to sit in and do some research with some incredible teachers who have been very thoughtful about what they had their students do with written languages. One of these classes was the seventh-grade classroom in which I was watching a teacher use Sterling Brown’s poem “After Winter” (Tidwell & Tracy, 2009) with her
conversation currents | on discourse and language learning

classroom of both African American and white students. They were discussing the language of Sterling Brown’s poem, discussing what it meant, and how it was historically located. But as this teacher engaged these students in discussion, it became clear to me that what she was asking the students to do was reformulate the school literacy practice of comprehending a poem, of appreciating a poem, of understanding a poem. What she invited these students to do was engage in a literacy practice in which they used a written text—in this case Sterling Brown’s poem—to actually interrogate and problematize the world that they were in, and the set of concepts—the cultural ideology—given in and through the dominant institutions of which they were a part, and in and through “popular” commercial culture.

So they began to problematize concepts like “proper” and “improper” language, “educated” and “uneducated.” They began to problematize what it meant to speak in African American language versus Standard English. What was interesting to me in watching this classroom is that her students were taking up this practice. As this teacher continuously invited them to be participants in this practice and as they continuously engaged in this practice, they were able to take this practice, modify it, and adapt it themselves to new situations. I found this an extremely powerful example of how teachers can invite students into literacy practices. Yet, at the same time, it does not just become a matter of the students learning that particular literacy practice, but rather students learning how to take a practice and adapt it to new situations and to new goals and new things that they are doing. It raises some promises of what classroom education might take on as an agenda.

Arlette: I couldn’t agree with you more about the whole notion of language ideologies and the fact that teachers bring their beliefs as well as their attitudes to the classroom practice. Speaking of myself here in terms of preservice teacher education, how can I help my students develop a predisposition to go into the classroom where they invite all the languages that a child has into the space. Most of my students teach or are preparing to teach at the secondary level. In Illinois, this is grades six through twelve. A lot of what we do in our preservice classes is literature. I force their hand by making sure that the literature they read for the class is written, in large part, by scholars of color, whether it’s the professional literature and/or literature for their classroom. This is so that we can have these discussions in what I consider a safe space, the university classroom, and then they can take these discussions with them out into their own practice.

For example, recently I had a student doing his field experience tell me a story about a young African American man who had moved to a predominantly white, small, rural community, and was being bullied. As a normal course of action in the case of bullying, the administrator would send out emails alerting the teachers to the identity(ies) of those who were bullying and the one(s) being bullied. However, in the case of this particular student, the email from the administrator said that the student feels as if he is being bullied, and he never lists the bullies. My student was able to deconstruct this very quickly and say, “Well yeah, this student has resorted to retaliating, in fact, because he is being bullied. And if he feels as if he is being bullied, if that is his perception, then in fact it’s something that needs to be taken up.” So I’m hopeful that all my preservice students will be able to read these unstated messages and look past the assumptions or, in this case, the misrepresentation by the school administrator.

David: I think that’s a really powerful and useful example for segueing into thinking about this issue of discourse—or rather discoursing, which is the word I prefer—the using of language. I think there’s been a tendency to want to reduce classroom discourse to a set of formulas that say, “ask this question,” “say this thing,” “give this kind of response.” Language is not that simple, and it’s not that shallow either.

Arlette: I am so excited about what you’ve said because there is a move toward more scripted curricula (by curricula designers and publishers) whereby teachers are being told how they can expect students to respond. When children don’t respond in that way, I’m concerned about whether or not a teacher will have the facility to support the responses that the children give. As we well know, children who are most likely not to be supported are those who don’t respond...
in this kind of automated way that you talked about earlier. So if one or more children respond in their first or second language, but it’s not English and the teacher’s expecting something else, shouldn’t we be preparing these teachers to move children forward from whatever response they make?

As a teacher educator, I really want all teachers to be able to do that—to understand that language isn’t neutral, and the language of the teacher’s manual and classroom textbooks is just one possible set of responses. They have to feel empowered and have a sense of agency whereby they acknowledge and can support the language that students have. So, how do we help teachers develop this? For me, it always goes back to research. If the research from which we are building these new forms of responses is built on studies—for example, the Hart and Risley (1995) study, where the expectation is that only certain children have certain forms of language and/or broad enough vocabularies—I suggest that, in fact, there are many students who will appear to be “in need.” In this deficit language ideology, the needs of some students for school literacy never seem to get met; their needs just seem to multiply from year to year. Conversely, a more thoughtful approach, where the languages of students are accepted, valued, and included within the discourse of education, can lead to a more constructive building toward higher goals from what the students bring to the classroom.

David: What strikes me about what you said relates to the ongoing promulgation of deficit models of children and even teachers. Since long before my career and yours and probably for quite some time to come, unfortunately, one of the great and most important debates has to be around the use of these deficit models to frame teachers and instruction and, I’m sorry to say, to frame students and instruction. When we continuously see students as lacking, as having a deficit, maybe based on race, gender, ethnicity, language, and so forth, our instruction reflects that; it sends a loud message to students. Instead of doing that, I think what we really need to understand is that through our use of language, through how we act and react with each other through language, we are constructing ideologies and we are constructing knowledge. We need to take responsibility for that which we are constructing and, if we are constructing deficits, then we need to take responsibility for them, and deconstruct them and reconstruct them on a different basis.

It is quite possible to do this, as we saw with the teacher who taught the Sterling Brown poem I mentioned earlier. One does not need to enter instructional conversations on the basis of deficit models. One can enter them on the basis of knowledge construction with students in ways that not only position students as people who do construct knowledge, as people who make knowledge, but also as students who are able to reconstruct themselves as people who act on the world and have a place in the world—not just as people who are acted on. I don’t know what your observations have shown you, but too often, when I’m looking in classrooms, I see children who are passively sitting in desks, waiting for the bell to ring, just marking their time until they can get out. This strikes me as a situation in which students have been constructed as passive recipients of knowledge, passive in their body, passive in terms of being acted upon, passive in terms of their own relationships to each other, to academic knowledge, and so forth.

Arlette: Again, I couldn’t agree with you more. I love the idea that we, as a research community, can do better. Part of that begins with how we frame our research studies, as well the message that we share with the general public who doesn’t read the research broadly. They live on sound bites about the evils or the failures of public schools when, in fact, there are a lot of public schools that are doing a lot of wonderful work, and children are learning. We just need to do more of it, and we need to get the message out that children are alive and vital; they bring knowledge, and we need to work with the knowledge that they bring and move them forward. There is a real deficit mentality in a lot of the education research; I would like to begin a broad conversation about the more positive aspects of education research and how we are moving forward. Your very example of the teacher who taught Sterling Brown’s poem is a way to help people know that there are lots of teachers doing good work.

David: I want to bring this back to the notion of how we’re defining literacy because I
think it’s telling to do so. This whole notion of the deficit model is closely related to our discussion of how literacy is defined in the beginning of our conversation. Literacy is defined as a thing in and of itself, as a set of cognitive linguistic processes that you own rather than as engagement in particular social events and social practices that involve the non-trivial use of language. When it’s a thing in and of itself that you are either given or that you earn through your efforts in school, something like that, then we immediately assume and position students in a deficit mode because they don’t have it—they need to be given it, or they need to purchase it, or they need to somehow or other barter for it.

I think it will be difficult for educators and for classroom education to move away from deficit models until we move away from this autonomous definition of literacy and these autonomous definitions of reading and writing. Then we will have an opportunity to build classroom education on a different kind of basis than a deficit model.

Arlette: I would agree.

David: I’d like to make two suggestions about how classroom teachers can begin to look at how languages are used in classrooms. The first is to examine studies that actually have employed looking at classroom discourse and looking at teachers’ and students’ use of language.

FURTHER READING
Dr. Bloome and Dr. Willis’s conversation cited a number of resources that are listed here.


This gives one a sense of those classrooms through studying what is happening there. The second suggestion is to look at the uses of language in your own classroom, whether it’s audio recording or video recording or what have you, and then to sit down, perhaps with other teachers, to share the experience of examining and unpacking what is going on there, even briefly. Now one needs to be careful, because if we bring a deficit model to the looking at classroom discourse, well then, that’s what we’re going to end up seeing. So it’s important to prepare for looking at our own classrooms’ use of language with some self-education about notions of discourse in use and how people use language.

I think that your book On Critically Conscious Research—although it is about research—is extraordinarily readable and can provide a very helpful framing for teachers who want to look at their own classrooms and at the uses of language there. There are also some other extraordinarily useful resources. Lesley Rex’s book (Rex & Schiller, 2009) on classroom discourse is extremely helpful, I think. There’s some excellent work by Allan Luke and Stephanie Carter, and many other examples (see “Further Reading”) that can be very helpful in looking at teachers and their uses of classroom discourse. The underlying belief here is that there’s not one way that’s the right way. Rather,


what we do with language is always a sort of bricolage, so we need to look at the range of ways that people have used the language in order to enable students to use language effectively themselves. In that sense, we need to look across the different discourse practices in a broad range of classroom events. Again, it’s so much easier to learn a formula, but it’s not particularly a useful way to go.

**Arlette:** Right. David, I support all of those ideas. I particularly am drawn to teachers and educators reading studies about language in which language is actually a real part. So you’re not just reading about it, but the language is there for you to deal with or delve into. I’m thinking of Alim’s chapter in which he has a conversation with a teacher as well as with students, so the language is available. There’s also a wonderful piece that just came out in *Anthropology and Education* called “Narrating Beliefs: A Language Ideologies Approach to Teacher Beliefs” by Aria Razfar (2012). Again, there’s language there for teachers to look at.

I think self-knowledge is always really helpful; teachers look at their own practice and have students look at the language that they use by recording the language in the classroom. They have students talk back to them about the language they use, and then give students opportunities to use lots of different forms of language within the classroom. One of the things I think helps students the most is being able to talk about their work in the language that’s most comfortable to them. It’s important to give them opportunities to be creative, so that it doesn’t always fall into this notion of school discourse, or school language. Using technology, using media, and deconstructing the messages that are in the media—either individually or collectively, in small groups or as a whole class—gives students opportunities to use the language that they have.

**David:** I would agree. Some years ago, Ann Egan-Robertson and I edited a book called *Students as Researchers of Culture and Language in Their Own Communities*, and the chapters in that book were written or coauthored by classroom teachers themselves. We see a variety of ways in which teachers have engaged their students in looking at language and culture—ethnographically, sociolinguistically, and critically. I think we underestimate the ability we have as educators to engage our students in this sort of work. By doing so, students are able (as are teachers) to look at their own practices, to look at the language practices all around them, and to be able to make sense of them, to see the varieties of ways that they are contextualized, and to be able to understand the power relations that flow in, around, and through them. I have seen people use critical discourse analysis, modified of course, down into the early elementary grades. I think engaging our students in this, making them, if you will, co-researchers of the cultures and languages that surround us, provides them with an exciting curriculum. This also puts them in a better position to be able to construct for themselves, to deconstruct and then reconstruct for themselves, thus giving them a sense of the kinds of language and practices in which they themselves might want to engage.

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