Joy Ritchie and Margrethe Ahlschwede

Turning Telling into Knowing:
Teacher and Student Literacy Stories

Literacy is more complicated than I ever imagined. Before this class I thought literacy meant being able to read and write at a certain level of competency. Now I think of literacy as an onion... I've seen that everyone adds layers of literacy to their 'onion' all through their life and everyone's onion is different. ... I can no longer assume that my students grow up in the same middle class culture I did, and that any differences are only superficial and unimportant. I feel an urgency to at least start to help children have an understanding and respect for these differences.

—Nancy Rakes

Nancy, a sixth grade teacher, made this statement at the end of a recent summer workshop for K-12 teachers during which she and other teachers had written their literacy histories and had used them as a lens through which to examine their students' literacy development. Teachers like Nancy reaffirmed for us the importance of reclaiming and reconstructing our own histories and those of our students, and also of then looking again at those histories, interpreting and theorizing about them in order to turn them into sources of knowledge and authority.

Looking and looking again at the contexts in which literacy develops—in ourselves and in our students—was crucial for the insights we developed in the Nebraska Literacy Project, a five-week workshop for K-12 teachers modeled after the Nebraska Writing Project.

Ann Berthoff has noted in "The Teacher as REsearcher" that the impulses that guide educational research and change too often have come from institutions or bureaucratic forces outside the classroom, instead of from teachers' and students' experiences. As teachers, then, we are often pulled this way and that as we are asked to reassess and change our teaching. For that reason we decided that two ongoing activities would serve as the focus for our reading, writing, and thinking in the workshop. First, we encouraged teachers to begin writing their own reading and writing histories, and second, we also encouraged them to look closely at their students' histories and daily practices as readers and writers. We believe both of these activities are crucial to sustaining ourselves as reflective teacher researchers because they ground our teaching in the lived experiences of students and ourselves. Our work in the Literacy Project helped us see that our histories and our students' histories can help teachers begin making critical decisions for themselves, their students, and their classrooms, rather than adhering to prescribed ideologies of schooling.

The Nebraska Literacy Project, funded by the Peter Kiewit Foundation and the Department of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, was planned as a follow-up to the Nebraska Writing Project. Building on the National Writing Project model, teachers spent five weeks collaborating on a variety of "literacy events." They wrote and read aloud; they interviewed each other about their literacy histories; they wrote case studies; and they wrote poems, short stories, letters, and position statements.

The 1991 project involved two UN-L composition faculty members, Joy Ritchie, co-director of the Nebraska Writing Project, and Rick Evans, as well as Margrethe Ahlschwede, now on the faculty of the University of Tennessee at Martin where she directs the West Tennessee Writing Project.

The Nebraska Literacy Project continued for a second year in 1992 with another five-week intensive summer workshop. The Nebraska Writing Project is now planning a Multicultural Literature Project for the summer of 1994.
Literate Life Histories — Teachers’ Lives on the Boundaries

Joy Ritchie

Mom read the nursery rhymes with an expression that made them seem true to life. She sat in the antique oak rocking chair, reading from a tattered book she had discovered in a box of junk purchased at an auction. Many evenings, she taught us what she called ‘Old hillbilly songs.’ We memorized them and when we had done this she would haphazardly chord them out on the piano and we would sing for hours at a time: ‘I didn’t Know the Gun was Loaded/ I won’t go Huntin’ with You Jake, But I’ll go Chasing Women/ Too Old to Cut the Mustard Anymore.’ Sometimes when we were feeling outrageous, we would act out these silly ballads — a true literacy experience. —Amy Romshek

Taking our lessons from Paulo Freire and Ann Berthoff, who have taught us that knowing depends on understanding oneself as knower, my colleagues and I decided to begin the workshop by exploring our own literate life histories. In dramatic contrast to the monolithic and often restrictive definitions of literacy that schools often promote, this “text” of literacy histories provided evidence of the varied and diverse literacies we possess. Teachers’ stories about their own development illuminated the varied contexts in which literacy develops — in homes, communities, vacant lots, libraries, playgrounds and family vacations — and, as Amy’s story reveals, how literacy is intertwined in “everyday use,” as Alice Walker might describe it.

The stories also provided ample evidence of the varied forms reading and writing take — folk songs, games, narratives — forms which may seem to have little connection with the forms of literacy taught in schools but which are, nevertheless, crucial to a child’s overall development as a reader and writer and as a member of her community. While many teachers documented the rich climate for literacy in home and community, even in small towns and seemingly isolated rural settings, others reminded us of the contexts that often stifle literacy. In some farm communities in which teachers grew up, for example, reading was considered a frill, something to do only when all the other chores were done, a sign of laziness. The economic hardships of many teachers’ lives and the restrictive values of some of their rural communities also limited their access to reading and writing. Jean Miller wrote of growing up in a rural part of Nebraska:

I was never encouraged to read at home. ... My mother was forced to quit school in the 10th grade because her mother had died, and she needed to stay home to care for a younger sister. My father quit school when he was sixteen because the Depression had left his parents unable to provide him with much of anything. There was only one book our family owned — the Bible. I have never seen my mother or father read a book. (They do read newspapers.) Once, I recall my younger brother taking one of my library books from me and running away with it. I ran after him, screaming and yelling for him to give it back so he wouldn’t wreck it. Mother said, ‘If reading those books is going to cause trouble here at home, take them back now.’

Like many of the other teachers’ stories, Jean’s history highlighted the influence of interpersonal relationships on literacy and also the complex constraints gender and social class place on literacy. She wrote:

A person who definitely affected my literacy history is my friend Sue. We went to school together from kindergarten through 12th grade. College lasted only a year for both of us. Sue stayed in Lincoln to work. By the end of the summer, we both found it necessary to get married, or at least our families thought it would be a good idea. The father of Sue’s child was wounded in Vietnam. He came back to our small town just long enough for them to get married before leaving for medical treatment. A short time after he left, Sue, who was living with her mother, invited me to come over for a cup of coffee. That day was the turning point in my literacy life.

Sue wrote that Jean insisted on talking to her about books, poetry, Time and other magazines. As they raised their children in that small town, their friendship was an intellectual stimulus as well as a supportive relationship. In 1980, when Jean was working part-time as a waitress, Sue encouraged her to run for the school board in their small town. Jean was elected and was determined to be a good member who would stand up to the other five male members of the board on a number of important issues. Throughout that time, Sue, the reader, was her mentor and confidante on matters of educational policy. A few years later, when Jean’s husband went on strike with other meat packing plant workers, he encouraged Jean to go back to college. If Jean had a good job, their family might survive financially. Sue was envious of Jean’s decision and constantly questioned her about her classes, teachers, and the adjustment to student life. She also wrote to Jean almost daily.
Jean recalled the evening when Sue's husband called her to talk about the depression Sue was experiencing. He believed it was nothing more than her intense desire to be doing what Jean was doing—going to college. Jean continued their story:

In January 1984, Sue started to school with me. Those next two and a half years proved to be awakening years for both of us. We had the best discussions about literature, our writing, and our studies. She let me see some of her writing. I even performed some of her poetry for an interpretive readers' theater class I took. When I took the Nebraska Writing Project two years ago, I finally shared some of my writing with her... For the past 20 years she has been my literacy sounding board.

Jean's story could be the story of thousands of women. It demonstrates how social norms concerning gender roles have impinged on and often limited women's educational expectations and determined their social and economic positions because of their limited access to higher education.

Ellie's literate history demonstrated how such a supportive relationship could occur in school, with a teacher who helped her develop a life-long love of literature:

One of the most important persons in my entire long life is John Henry, a teacher at Hasting High... I would wish for every student one relationship like ours... Until my sophomore year, I had been pretty stuck on how to create a written text or read and understand literature. He moved me beyond that level and into the world of enjoying and getting inside words... I learned from Mr. Henry that reading literature is about... getting inside a text and 'hearing the voices.'

Ellie became a more sophisticated reader of literature, no longer viewing reading as a mechanical, detached process performed to find the right answers for a test, but as a process of active engagement, of living inside the literature she read and performed. Her teacher also made her feel capable, important, made her look good, become the "star."

While teachers like Mr. Henry nurtured their development as readers, other teachers' adherence to limiting definitions of reading and writing, to codified canons of literature, to rigid methodologies, and to unquestioned teacher authority and the absolute virtue of classroom control created barriers to their students' development as readers and writers. Jean wrote about one of her teachers:

What I remember most about this teacher is that we rarely read from our reading books. Her main idea of English... was that students should know the eight parts of speech and be able to diagram sentences on command... One day I asked why we never got to read books. She told me to stand out in the hall until she could come out to discuss the matter with me. She took hold of me and shook me, asking me why I would ask such a question. I simply said I liked to read and wondered why we never got to read... She raised her hand to me ready to strike. I remember being scared to death, but looking straight up at her and saying, 'If you hit me, I'll go right up to the principal's office and tell him.' She told me that it was attitudes like mine that caused wars... I withdrew in her classroom and said very little again... Miss Fleming, another English teacher, was a fanatic for her interpretation of literature. At the end of the year we read Great Expectations. I read the entire novel the first weekend after she handed out the book, and on Monday proudly exclaimed in class: 'I know what happens because I read it all.' Miss Fleming snapped, 'How could you spoil it for everyone? I told you only to read what was assigned.' Miss Fleming made sure that for the next four weeks as we read and discussed Dickens, she did not call on me to answer the questions.

These literacy histories hold direct lessons for teachers about the homes and communities our students come from, about the contexts and relationships that nurture reading and writing, and about the barriers schools create to literacy when students' ideas, opinions, and capabilities are devalued, when difference or failure to conform are interpreted as deficiency. As we read and listened to these histories I worried that the potential these stories held for expanding our understanding of reading and writing and for reexamining our teaching would not be realized.

I wanted to help teachers establish patterns of self-reflection that could become a useful source of critique and decision-making for them. I wanted their personal literacy histories to serve as a source of personal and professional authority to help them examine their own assumptions and practices and to challenge the abstract and impersonal descriptions of literacy often promoted by educational institutions.

I realized that if their own histories were to become more than pleasant stories, we needed to theorize about those stories, to help ourselves assume a spectator rather than merely a participant role. Paulo Freire says the recovery of personal histories may be a form of
lending memory, enabling us to “check and criticize” the history we are told against the one we have lived (Literacy: Reading the Word, p. 53). I hoped that this process would allow us as teachers to claim authority to examine and challenge restrictive views of reading and writing in order to stretch the definitions of literacy that guide our schools and classrooms.

But learning does not occur in visible, tidy five-week packages. I was aware that my goals and desires do not always fit the needs of those with whom I work. I worried, too, about pushing too quickly for analysis and theorizing when others might not be ready to do so. However, as teachers interviewed each other about their reading and writing histories they began to do some of the theorizing I hoped for. As they looked for commonalities and differences among their own and their students’ histories, they formally analyzed the meaning of these experiences. At the end of the workshop we each wrote final statements about literacy to allow us to compose our beliefs, assumptions, and questions concerning literacy in light of our work together during the five-week project. Those statements were incredibly varied; we did not all arrive at one single set of beliefs, but within many of their statements was powerful evidence of the thinking they were doing. Ellie Wilson wrote:

I have come to understand that literacy has definite connections to power, to politics, to citizenship and therefore is controversial. A good look at many current classroom procedures in my school suggests that they are not enhancing and encouraging growth in literacy. The project has encouraged me to do what I can to move my students along the continuum of

literacy, to nudge the system, and to stretch the limits.

In contacts with some of these teachers since the end of the workshop, we’ve found that many of them have engaged in a more gradual and less predictable process of reconceptualizing literacy and examining the assumptions about teaching their redefinitions imply. They have done so, as our own histories should have allowed me to predict, in their own terms, on their own schedules, and in ways suited to their own teaching contexts.

Several teachers have continued to meet with each other, often across long distances, recreating the close relationships that had always sparked their literacy and learning. Several have written articles for language arts publications, and some have met to draft a prospectus for a book about their experiences since the summer project.

Sue Anderson, one of the teachers in the project, says: “This project created an opportunity for us to reflect, and then you treated what we’d written as though it were valuable, and that made me look at it again and ask, ‘Why is my story so important?’”

Sue affirms the importance of writing our histories, but she also demonstrates that we must insist on the next crucial step — theorizing, or, as she says, “Looking and looking again,” in order to ask, “Why is this important?” If we push beyond the initial telling to make the vital interpretive turn Sue describes, we are less likely to be trapped in methodologies and beliefs about literacy that run counter to our own experience and to the experiences of students and teachers around us.

Writing our Students’ Stories: 
Appreciating the Plurality of Literacies in the Classroom
Margrethe Ahlswede

Sitting in the circle of Nebraska Literacy Project teachers, Ellen Stokeland always insisted, “I’m not an English teacher. I’m a resource teacher.” Her students at Palmyra Junior-Senior High, a school of about a hundred fifty students located in a rural community east of Lincoln, Nebraska, are identified as learning disabled. A semester and a half after the Literacy Project, Ellen reflects in this way about her work and her students:

Learning disabled kids come here defeated. They’ve never been told they have the ability. They’ve been told, ‘you can’t do it.’ Teachers have had such low

expectations that some kids think, everybody’s quit on me. But I always tell them they don’t have an excuse to be dumb.

She talks about one particular student, Brett, whose tests indicate an IQ of 70-80 and thus is identified as mildly retarded, a “ruffian” turned goal-oriented senior, farming with his grandfather, planning to continue farming:

“I don’t think he ever had been told he could write,” Ellen says. “But he writes his opinions in journals for his government class. He’s written stories about taking
cattle to market, and he subscribes to and reads a car magazine and Successful Farming, things his mother thought she would never see him do.” Despite the fact that Brett does not capitalize a thing, hates to punctuate, “can’t spell worth beans,” probably will be very illiterate on any test, and in statistics would show up as one of those kids who will be in trouble with the law a time or two, Ellen is convinced Brett will make it.

Nine miles north of Lincoln, Sue Anderson teaches senior high English and journalism and is advisor to the yearbook at Waverly High School, another school in a rural setting. The classroom portion of Sue’s teaching space is set up with tables and chairs formed into a U. Adjoining this area is a smaller room with darkroom and tables for newspaper layout. In the larger room, huge sheets of newsprint hang on a far wall — students’ lists of books read. Sue’s desk is by the blackboard but, as she says, “I’m usually not at my desk.”

Before Sue’s participation in the Nebraska Writing Project three years prior to the Literacy Project, she was a teacher with, as she puts it, “absolutely no mercy. For many years I thought there was only one right way to do things and there were sometimes students had to get out of this class, and I would die trying, if I had to, to get them to learn these things.” But after the Writing Project she became a teacher whose approach to her students had to do with her attitude and sense of responsibility toward them. And the Literacy Project experience took Sue even farther:

I care for my students a lot. I care about why they read and why they write. It has nothing to do with what grade they get. It has everything to do with their feeling good about themselves. I have compassion for my students and I trace it back to Literacy Project discussions about being literate persons.

One of Sue’s most satisfying success stories is Trip, “a hellraiser,” as she puts it, when he began Sue’s sophomore English class. After her Literacy Project experience, she had decided to turn the class into a reading-writing workshop to integrate her learnings from the Writing and Literacy projects and her readings of Nancie Atwell, Lucy Calkins, Shirley Brice Heath, Mike Rose and others.

He must have figured out that there was something about this workshop class that was worth his time, because Trip, who had never read a whole book from cover to cover, decided he was being given the chance to read anything he wanted to read, so he would read a Stephen King book. He went to the library and checked out Tommyknockers, seven hundred pages and said, “I really want to read it, but I don’t think I can get it done,” and I said, “You just read as far as you can and we’ll see where you are.” He ended up finishing the book in a quarter — nine weeks — quite an accomplishment for him. He wrote several really good pieces with more than one draft. He journaled every week to me. He got so that he was doing a lot of his work at home as well as here.

At parent-teacher conferences Sue discovered that Trip’s mother had no idea of what he had been doing in class. When she handed Trip’s mother his folder of work, his mother couldn’t believe it. “This is Trip?” She went through all of his drafts. She got tears in her eyes, broke down and cried. She said, “Never before has anything ever happened to Trip like this.”

Sue and Ellen’s literacy stories have been repeated in the University of Nebraska Writing Lab where I worked with Darrell, a scholar-athlete a long way from his home state.

Darrell had come to the lab in the spring on the recommendation of his composition teacher the previous semester. He came primarily to practice writing longer, more fully-developed prose. And while writing longer was Darrell’s main goal, the content he chose to get to those longer pieces was never simplistic or easy.

The first week we worked together Darrell wrote that in his eighth grade social studies project on Martin Luther King he learned that people could hate a person for his color. He related that to an experience several years later when he heard a boy explain to a friend how he did not like “niggers.” Darrell wrote:

Gosh, I thought he was going to get his ass kicked. Later that day I saw the very same boy talking to three black boys at lunch. I could not believe what I was seeing. He did not like blacks but he would converse with them. I did not attempt to retaliate, but I did begin to see very clearly racism hidden under a phony face. The picture was very clear. I saw racism like the sixties but in a new way. I figured out that whites would make an effort to get along with blacks just so they would not cause problems for them. . . .

The second week that Darrell came to the Writing Lab I brought along a copy of Sure Signs (Pitt Press, 1980), a book of poems by Nebraska poet Ted Kooser. I showed Darrell a poem I thought he might like. He read it. Then he paged through the book and found the poem, “So This Is Nebraska.”

After he read it I suggested he write his own poem, “So This Is My Home Town.” Here are excerpts from more than a page of writing:
[My Home Town]. Just a small spot on the map, not much bigger than an ant. Within this town you could learn the American way of life. Doing favors for money, have the rich get richer, and the poor resort to crime. [My Home Town], the town of towns, the summer brings tension and hostility, and the winter brings clean streets and white snow. . . .

Women have babies, babies having babies. . . . [My Home Town] . . . a town to be abused and isolated because of the intense lack of will to leave. [My Home Town] the town that explains a nation, a town that lives the way the government runs the country. And other towns gives us a bad name for emulating a nation.

His writing is poetic. In this and his other writings in the lab, Darrell uses clear images. He writes the details. He writes about what he knows and in the process takes on important social issues.

But there is another aspect of Darrell’s writing. If you were to look at his writing as he wrote in the lab, not corrected for spelling and checked for errors in usage as I’ve done some for this article, you might say that Darrell is semi-literate. In Darrell’s raw writing, American isn’t capitalized, phony starts with the letter F, and he intends cite but writes instead sight.

When, after several months, I re-read Darrell’s writing, un-edited and un-proofed, these “errors” stuck out. I fell into the same judgment trap as my colleague. I responded to Darrell’s “mistakes” immediately, but then realized that Darrell knows his community. He sees and understands the people around him. He makes connections between what he reads and studies and what he experiences in life. Like Ellen’s student “who can’t capitalize worth beans” but who reads Successful Farming, Darrell is no semi-literate.

In these three classroom literacy stories about Brett, Trip, and Darrell several things stand out. Ellen sees literacy in the student whom the system has tagged learning disabled and mildly retarded, the student who writes stories about taking cattle to market and who subscribes to and reads Successful Farming as he prepares himself to farm with his grandfather. Sue sees a literate star in a hell-raiser who had never read a book cover to cover but who in nine weeks read seven hundred pages of text and then wrote about his reading. And Darrell, who doesn’t write long, whose spelling needs spell-check, makes beauty and music with his language and leaves me thinking because of his insights.

What will happen to Darrell during his next English class, in the next psychology class where he could be asked to write a twenty-page paper, or when Darrell completes a job application and a prospective employer decides that Darrell’s ways of spelling and capitalization clearly indicate his unfitness for a job?

Without Ellen’s encouragement, what will Brett read next? Will he read the paper enough to be informed of county land-use policy when, as might happen, urban sprawl and development come nearer the land he farms? What happens if Trip’s next teacher doesn’t encourage, doesn’t see and play to Trip’s talents, and instead tells him what to read, when to write, and how much? Will he succeed in his next English classroom? Will he continue his literate behaviors through high school and beyond?

**Turning Telling into Knowing**

Margrethe and Joy

Our work in the Literacy Project has prompted us to see ourselves and our students differently. We are all literate persons, whose literacy development continues to be inextricably linked to our development as people, to the continuing potential for discovering meaning through language. We reaffirm that our role as teacher is not to judge and check, but to marvel, to see, to ask questions, to encourage, and to discover again and again ourselves and our students as literate persons.

This Literacy Project has helped us build habits of self-reflection — to step back and to ask questions. How are our students served by our views of them and of ourselves? How is society served? What are our expectations for ourselves and our students in our English courses — to affirm and practice alternatives in language use? To develop educated voters? To attend to the practice of current language conventions?

Finally, our work with teachers and students affirms the value of telling our own stories and of re-telling our students’ stories in order to examine and theorize about both. Hayden White in On Narrative talks about the way scientists and historians translate their knowledge into narrative, “knowing into telling” he calls it (p. 1). Our task is to help ourselves and our students translate
telling into knowing. Telling stories allows us to affirm that literacy is about suspending judgment and welcoming ideas. Telling stories allows us to reflect and then reflect again, asking what it means to think, to read, to write, and to know.

References


