

*READ Journal Highlights*

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It gives me great pleasure to have the honor of introducing this first issue of *READ, an Online Journal for Literacy Educators*. The journal is housed in the Department of Language, Literacy, and Special Populations (LLSP) in the College of Education, with the support of the Newton Gresham Library, at Sam Houston State University (SHSU) in Huntsville, Texas. Our department offers coursework in NCATE accredited undergraduate teacher preparation and nationally recognized Master's programs in Reading/Language Arts and Special Education. Our online Master's program in International Literacy is one of the fastest growing ESL/EFL graduate programs in the state of Texas, and we are especially proud to offer a respected doctoral program in Literacy, as well.

The READ journal is peer-reviewed and focuses on literacy issues of relevance for teachers, teacher educators, and school administrators. The theme of this first issue, "Transforming Lives through Literacy," was selected to coincide with the theme of the annual *Joan Prouty Conference on Early Literacy*, hosted by our LLSP department earlier in the fall of 2015. We also welcome submissions for this conference each year in the spring and summer. I would like to thank our Assistant Professor, Dr. Benita Brooks for creating and editing *READ* and for co-chairing the annual Joan Prouty conference. Dr. Brooks, the members of the editorial review team, and Dr. Karin Perry from the SHSU Library Science Department, who assisted with the design of the website, are to be commended for the scholarly nature of the publication. We are looking forward to the continued success of the journal in the coming years and encourage contributions from undergraduate and graduate students and preK-12 teachers, as well as from those who are currently teaching in higher education.

In my review of this issue a recurring theme seemed to emerge, beyond that of the transformational nature of literacy. Several authors framed their work through the lens of social constructivist notions of learning, using small group discussions to achieve an outcome, whether academic, attitudinal or dispositional. These outcomes were applied with students at differing levels on our educational continuum, from intermediate school as in the case of Vanessa Morrison's work, to Joanna Weaver's discussion of returning to teaching in the secondary classroom, to teacher preparation in Karen Kindle's and Danielle Forest's article, and finally across the disciplinary spectrum at the university, as in the article by Ramona Pittman and Deirdre McDonald. Each of these authors approached the use of small group discussions in distinct ways, yet the foundation of their arguments was rooted in the construction and negotiation of meaning.

In her article, entitled, "**Peer-led Discussions of Social Studies Text: Comprehension Strategies in Action,**" Vanessa Morrison presents a case study of 5<sup>th</sup> graders engaging in small group discussions of texts related to social studies. Citing Vygotsky and Dewey, among others, the author aimed to create a space for learning through social interaction. As a result of her efforts, students made connections of "text to self" and practiced some of the comprehension strategies they had already learned in class, such as prediction, QAR, and critical thinking. Dr. Morrison skillfully illustrates how the *nature* of talk among intermediate students in small groups is more important than simply engaging them in discussions.

In her qualitative study entitled “**Expert Student to Novice teacher: Identity Shifts in Literacy Teacher Education,**” Karen Kindle explored the use of dialogic inquiry groups in a university elementary reading methods course. Her main argument is that teacher candidates not only must learn skills and knowledge associated with teaching, they also need to develop an identity as teachers as they progress through their field experiences. Basing her work on social learning theory, she organized small group sessions so that candidates could explore the kinds of problem-solving behaviors teachers engage in, when discussing the progress of their own students. These discussions were effective in moving teacher candidates from an identity as a university student to adopting an identity more akin to that of a novice teacher. She describes this identity as involving careful observation of children, self-reflections about teaching, and a willingness to take the child’s perspective. Her conclusion is that student dispositions in teacher preparation should include demonstrating a belief that *all* students can be successful.

In their pilot study, “**Transforming the Literacy Lives of Postsecondary Students: A Preliminary Study of Writing Workshops at the University Level**” Ramona Pittman and Deirdre McDonald applied a writing workshop approach to assist 21 students from various disciplines, working in groups to address some areas of concern in their writing. At the end of the program, students completed surveys to determine the effectiveness of the program. The researchers found that the students perceived the workshops to be helpful in improving their academic writing, as well as their confidence in their writing ability. The authors conclude that this type of program is more effective than one-on-one tutoring, because students are provided with mini-lessons addressing specific areas of need and are able to receive feedback from peers from other disciplines.

In her column, entitled “**Return to the Trenches**” Joanna Weaver describes her return to teaching secondary English after having been working in academia for two decades. Armed with notions of active and engaging instruction based on the theories of Dewey and Rosenblatt, she was able to try out what she terms as “new basics,” i.e. multi-literacies, multimodal texts, problem-solving, and creativity. Although she found the experience challenging, she was able to engage her 120 students, all boys, through small group discussions geared towards the boys’ own interests and experiences. Student choice was an integral part of her program, both in terms of what the boys read and in how they displayed their knowledge. Her detailed sample units are truly inspiring for all of us old-timers who wonder how we ourselves might face the challenge of teaching once again in a public school environment fraught with the complexities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Danielle Forest too applied small groups, but with students in her reading methods class in her study, “**Talk Show: A Technique to Facilitate Understanding of Story Characters.**” The goal was to demonstrate a technique for improving upper intermediate or middle school students’ understanding of story characters’ “inner motives and goals” She found that students, even at the university level, responded favorably to the activity. Using a social constructivist framework, the author placed students in small groups to decide how characters in fictional stories might respond to a series of questions. Then through a panel discussion of representatives from each team, the audience came to understand the different perspectives of the characters about these same questions. Like Dr. Weaver, Danielle provides us with a nice example of her technique using the book *Al Capone Does my Shirts*. As an added bonus, she aligns the activity with the common core state standards, making the connection to the public school curriculum.

In her commentary, “**Response to Intervention: A Cautious Tale in the Quest to Transform Lives**” Nancy Stockall presents a fictional account of an elementary student’s experience in an RTI program and raises critical questions with regard to the implementation and the possible consequences of these programs for students she deems as “non-responders”. She targets the effectiveness of RTI in identifying students who might qualify in

the category of specific learning disability. Because of the paucity of federal guidelines with respect to the implementation of RTI, she points out how school districts' interpretations may vary. She concludes by calling for more research and continuous monitoring of the effectiveness of RTI when used as a means for determination of placement in special education.

Finally, Melinda Miller and Elizabeth Lasley offer some very fine book reviews of *Readicide: How schools are killing reading and what you can do about it*, by Kelly Gallagher and *Mindset, the new psychology of success* written by C.S. Dweck, both of which suggest that as educators we need to foster changes in our own attitudes, as well as that of our students in order to bring about a love of reading, as Gallagher notes or a love of learning, as Dweck indicates.

The research, practical suggestions, and commentaries in this issue resonate well with the theme of transformation, but with a focus on the transformation of literacy education itself through social interaction. Through their work, the authors have shown how interacting with peers in small group discussions can assist students in various ways: 1) at the elementary level in reading comprehension in a content area; 2) in their understanding of characters' motives in narratives, as they complete reading methods in teacher preparation; 3) in their quest to assume the identity of novice teachers as in their university field experiences; 4) in becoming motivated and engaged with new literacies at the secondary level; and 5) in their academic writing in college coursework. The issue then includes a cautionary tale about claiming our interventions as panaceas for the ills we see in our educational system. As this author suggests, we must continue to monitor and revise our interventions if we hope to truly transform lives.

I appreciate the opportunity of participating in and celebrating the launching of this new journal, and I am looking forward to the next issue in June 2016, having as its theme, **Literacy in a Multilingual Context**.

