MAKING MEANING WITH READERS AND TEXTS

Beginning Teachers' Meaning-Making from Classroom Events

Christi U. Edge

ADVANCES IN RESEARCH ON TEACHING

VOLUME 40

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MAKING MEANING WITH READERS AND TEXTS: BEGINNING TEACHERS' MEANING-MAKING FROM CLASSROOM EVENTS

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Every reading act is an event, or a transaction involving a particular reader and a particular pattern of signs, a text, and occurring at a particular time in a particular context.
(Rosenblatt, 2019, p. 455)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christi U. Edge is a Professor of Education and Scholar for Extended Learning and Community Engagement at Northern Michigan University, USA. Prior to academe, Christi was an award-winning high school English language arts and reading teacher and Tampa Bay Area Writing Project fellow. Her research addresses meaning making from teaching and learning events, multimodal literacy, narrative inquiry, and self-study of practice.

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PREFACE

The research represented here began in practice as theory came alongside my knowing, doing, and becoming – first as a high school English and reading classroom teacher and then as a teacher educator. Side by side, practice and theory danced together like bodies moving with tension, flexing, leaning, shifting, stepping, finding moments of harmony in and with the music.

THE SPACE BETWEEN

Research and scholarship focused on reading instruction have documented meaning-making involves a complex process through which readers use language and experience to construct internal (in-the-mind) tentative understandings as they negotiate meaning and revise their interpretations of the external (printed, visual, aural, etc.) communicative signs to which they attend. Concomitantly, since the 1990s there has been growing attention to adolescent and adult learners' reading and literacy needs. Research has called for continued reading and literacy instruction as learners attend to more complex texts. Recognizing discipline-specific literacy practices has led to calls for research and instruction to cultivate students' disciplinary literacy and learning (e.g., Hall, 2005; Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Wilson, 2011) as well as teachers' professional development for teaching reading across content areas and for teaching disciplinary literacy (e.g., International Reading Association, 2012; Pasternack, Caughlan, Hallman, Renzi, & Rush, 2014; Scott, McTigue, Miller, & Washburn, 2018; Smagorinsky & Whiting, 1995). Other scholars have depicted society itself as a kind of ambiguous cultural text – one its members are continuously reading, interpreting, and creating (Bruner, 1986; Cooper & Simonds, 2007; Gee, 2008; Geertz, 1973; Goodman, 1984), guided by their frame of expectations (Popper, 1962). Nevertheless, we know little about the ways that these two – making meaning through disciplinary texts and making meaning in life – come together in classrooms from the perspective of the teachers who read and make meaning from classroom events.

While teacher education research has long documented beginning teachers' struggles into the profession (e.g., Hammerness et al., 2005; Jackson, 1998; Kennedy, 1999; Lortie, 1975; Smagorinsky, Rhym, & Moore, 2013), this book addresses an unexplored space situated in the nexus of research on teaching, the lifeworlds of teachers, literacy, and making meaning from teaching and learning events. This book documents how beginning teachers read and made meaning from classroom events. Connecting meaning and experience in the fields of

English education, teacher education, literacy, and narrative inquiry, this book materializes new insights for advancing teacher education, research, and practice. Teaching is reimagined as transactional reading and composing – curriculum, identity, relationships, and culture.

EXPLORING THE SPACE BETWEEN

This book was born out of exploring the space between reading and literacy instruction in secondary English language arts and literature on the one hand and teacher education on the other. These are the "worlds" I have been bridging for 25 years of practice, first as a high school English, literature, and reading teacher, then as a Tampa Bay Area Writing Project Fellow transitioning from teaching to teacher education, as an English education and teacher education graduate teaching fellow during my doctoral program, as a teacher educator who works with practicing teachers and prospective teachers from all disciplines in field-based methods courses, and as a scholar for extended learning and community engagement who works alongside and with faculty in higher education.

This book is born from the space between with the intention of demonstrating how what is known in the discipline of English literature, language arts, reading and literacy can help educators (re)see, understand, affirm, shape, construct, and transform the work of teaching and learning. A kind of crosswalk between these worlds is Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory (1978, 2019), reimagined and extended to new contexts, stitching new conceptions of texts, readers, and writers. Through nearly two decades of inquiry through research and teaching in various contexts, I have connected and utilized the central tenets of Rosenblatt's theory alongside broadened understandings of *text*, *reading*, and *literacy* to teaching and teacher education. Notably, I do think the theory resulting from these years of practice and research is not limited to teaching and learning in teacher education; however, teacher education through literacy practices has been my central focus.

This book foregrounds teachers as meaning-makers. Both teachers and students can be understood as active meaning-makers who read the world around them and make meaning. My focus is attending to teachers' meaning-making with the understanding that what teachers know and do makes a difference in student learning. While I attend to teachers, it is always with learners and learning in mind. Better understanding how teachers know and do matters – for learning, democracy, and radical love. At a time when education in the United States is threatened by attempts to sterilize teaching and learning with scripted curriculum, when a litany of high-stakes assessments continue to skew attention, when teachers are expected to work in deprofessionalized cultures and untenable conditions further exacerbated by a global pandemic, when teachers are forced to fear for their students' and their own lives, the need to better understand *how* teachers know and do the work of teaching and learning has never been greater. Fostering teachers and learners touches the quick of the human learning experience – with implications for all aspects of humanity and the human experience.

MINDING THE GAP

Findings from the longitudinal research represented in this book demonstrate the space between as the multidimensional space for making meaning. The metaphors of quilt, story, and poem are heuristics for attending to the distinct, yet relational ways of making and representing meaning.

As a whole, this book is a composite story of research lived and told, knit together, like a quilt, as a result from piecing together many stories, experiences, and events, threading each text together with strands of knowledge from multiple spools of thought. As a whole, the book is a kind of "poem" – that is, meaning(s) made and positioned here as a form of practical art. As story, quilt, and poem, readers of this text can fashion visions of possibility, uncover questions, resee experience, connect, discover, and begin to compose/enact their own poems.

LITERARY READING

I invite my readers to join me in a literary reading (Probst, 1990; Rosenblatt, 1938) of longitudinal research. This research aimed to bridge a gap in the knowledge base between what teachers know and do by inquiring into how teachers read and make meaning from classroom events. What is a literary reading? Literary reading is a reading that respects and makes room for the human experience. Literary reading is a "process by which we participate in another's vision, learn something significant about the world, [and] acquire the insights that make our lives more comprehensible" (Probst, 1990, pp. 28–29). In this moment, I participate in Probst's (1990) vision for Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration* (1938) in classrooms. Through his synthesis, application, and vision, I make connections to my past experiences and present wonderings that help me lean toward what I am on the verge of understanding and communicating. I borrow some of his words and through them create connections to my thoughts and make meanings between his printed pages and my own. I am reading and composing in my mind, and at this moment, composing on my computer screen. What Probst asks as a question, "What is literary reading?" I consider and compose as invitation in response to the unfolding event. Rosenblatt (2019) described this phenomenon as a second stream of response in which something triggers conscious reflection.

> We must recognize during the reading event a concurrent stream of reactions to, and transactions with, the emerging evocation. Even as we are generating the evocation, we are reacting to it; this may in turn affect our choices as we proceed with the reading. Such responses may be momentary, peripheral, or felt simply as a general state, for example, an ambiance of acceptance or perhaps of confirmation of ideas and attitudes brought to the reading. Sometimes something unexpected or contrary to prior knowledge or assumptions may trigger conscious reflection. (p. 461)

To call attention to your own stream of response, dear reader, you might, for example, be considering the ideas I am communicating and, while glancing at the size of this text, wonder if a literary reading might mean a lot of work on your

part, or wonder if the whole text will include granular attention to thinking, or hear yourself talk back to the text, *Get on with it already!* Or, perhaps you are intrigued by a text that seems to be breaking some unspoken "rules" of academic research writing, and you sense your mind and body opening a bit to possibility or closing with dismissal of what does not align with expectation. Perhaps, having some background knowledge about Rosenblatt, you sense the parallel spaces of writing and reading about theory as it is employed. You may even recall Rosenblatt wrote, "The various strands of response, especially in the middle ranges of the efferent-aesthetic continuum, are sometimes simultaneous, interacting, and interwoven. They may seem actually woven into the texture of the evocation itself" (2019, p. 461). From the connection between your background knowledge and the words you read here, you may notice your own stream active of reading-composing. In any case, you are here and are thinking *with* the text. Describing a literary reading, Probst (1990) writes:

> The symbolic dance of words on paper awakens memories, arouses feelings, evokes thought, conjures images, but all those memories, feelings, thoughts, and images are the reader's as much as – even more than – they are the writer's or the texts. . .. Reading, then, is a process of creating rather than simply receiving. It is active, not passive. And it requires readers to attend not only to what is on the page, but also to what they have brought with them to that page. (p. 29)

While there will be "things" to take away from this text, it is my hope and my goal to include readers in the meaning-making process as creators who actively participate, with attention to what is on the page, what they bring with them to the page, and what – through the reading experience – they begin to envision. Literary reading is a generative process of exploration and discovery that aims for praxis. While I did not initially realize I had been, for some time, employing literary reading to how I read and created learning opportunities first as a teacher and then as a teacher educator, the research I represent in this book helped me to become aware of literary reading and composing as a way of thinking about the stories teachers and students live and tell in classrooms. Learning to see literary reading helped make more visible my own inchoate knowledge, helped me attend to others' ways of knowing, and helped me to begin seeing when literary reading was present and absent in teachers' meaning-making from classroom events. Candidly, I feel compelled to aim to communicate what I have come to understand from studying reading and writing in classrooms in a way that also honors that knowledge by reflecting it and creating space for others' meaning-making. (I too have experienced the paradox of, for example, being told I should be teaching students through active learning in transmissive style sit-and-get lecture about active learning.)

Once again, I lean to the knowledge I sense and connect to in Probst's (1990) words:

> If readers are to learn from their reading, they must begin with the visions it awakens in them and work from there. Teachers, abiding by this principle, have begun to ask students what they see, feel, think, and remember as they read, encouraging them to attend to their own experience of the text. And teachers (those who accept the responsibility transferred to them) find students testing the literature in the light of their own experience, and rethinking their own experience in

> the light of the text. The questions initiate talk, not just about the text, but about reader-and-text. They invite consideration not just of what the text presents, but also of its significance in the intellectual and emotional life of the reader. (pp. 31–32)

As a reader and as a teacher to myself and others, I aim to continue learning from my reading classroom events with beginning teachers by beginning with the visions reading awakened in me and work from there.

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PART I

ENVISIONING TEACHERS AS READERS, WRITERS, AND MEANING-MAKERS

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IMAGINING TEACHERS AS READERS

> Remember that anyone can struggle given the right text. The struggle isn't the issue; the issue is what the reader does when the text gets tough. (Beers, 2003, p. 15)

"CAN YOU SHOW ME WHAT A STRUGGLING READER LOOKS LIKE?"

The 2006 Florida Council Teachers of English (FCTE) pre-conference workshop on teaching struggling readers (Beers, 2006) began with a question: "Can you show me what a struggling reader looks like?" Without hesitation, hundreds of English teachers moved. Many slumped down into their seats and folded their arms across their chest; others pulled imaginary sweatshirts over their heads, assumed the half-asleep-on-one-elbow pose, or pushed imaginary books across the tables in front of them. Communicated in collective body language, the poignant perception of what a struggling reader looks like stilled the room. "Given a challenging text, *anyone* can struggle," Kylene Beers spoke into the silence. As explained in her book, *When Kids Can't Read, What Teachers Can Do* (2003),

> I want to consider what it suggests when we all visualize that same type of student, this stereotypical posture of the struggling reader. I believe it suggests a stereotype that excludes more readers than it includes. . ..We cannot make the struggling reader fit one mold or expect one pattern to suffice for all students. Not all struggling readers sit at the back of the room, head down, sweatshirt hood pulled low, notebook crammed with papers that are filled with half-completed assignments, a bored expression, though that often is the image that springs to mind when we hear the term *struggling reader*. . ..[R]emember that *anyone* can struggle given the right text. (Beers, 2003, pp. 14–15)

As a sea of teachers slowly nodded their heads with awareness growing to agreement, the situation compelled my attention. It struck me as both problematic and promising that, as educators, we can conceptualize and embrace every *student* needs instruction and strategies throughout the duration of their education in order to make meaning from increasingly complex texts, yet each teacher's ability to provide meaningful instruction is predicated upon their ability to read and to make sense of their students' literacy abilities and needs in each situation. What happens when the *teacher* is the "reader" struggling to make

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sense of the teenage "texts" in the classroom? What strategies do teachers employ for successfully reading and interpreting the learning abilities and needs of their students? How do beginning teachers successfully read and make meaning from the challenging "texts" we call *students*, *curriculum*, *classrooms*, *teaching*, *learning*, and being a *teacher*?

SEEING TEACHERS AS READERS AND MEANING MAKERS

Questions born from this moment of rhizome became a critical event in the story of my lived experiences as I transitioned from being a high school English and reading teacher to becoming a teacher educator and educational researcher. My wonderings lead me on a journey through stacks of library books, conversations with teachers, numerous nights contemplating research across conference tables in doctoral classes, and five semesters teaching prospective teachers. Two years later, I returned to the annual FCTE conference. In the same city, same hotel, and same grand ballroom, once again filled with hundreds of English teachers sitting at the same round tables, I again found myself before Kylene Beers – this time with her colleague Robert Probst – in a teacher workshop (Beers & Probst, 2008) focused on helping adolescent readers. In two years, my wonderings had come full circle.

While Beers and Probst (2008) challenged us to consider twenty-first-century literacy demands, reminded us that any reader can be a struggling reader given the "right" text, and inspired us to show students how to struggle *through* challenging texts in order to learn and make meaning from them, I once again looked about the ballroom. However, this time I didn't see a sea of teachers nodding heads in unison; instead, I saw the first-year teacher to my left vigorously scribbling notes in the margins of her handouts. I saw the seasoned teacher across from me whose quizzical brows seemed to hold some silent "ah-ha" in them. I saw what looked like awe in the faces of prospective teachers seated around a nearby table as they soaked up the inspiring words of this educational "rock star" – words they'd read in print and talked about in our university classroom but now experienced anew in this moment. When one of them broke her gaze from Beers to look over toward me, we exchanged in silent smile a shared knowing: "Yes, this *is* what we were talking about in class." And it was more. As I took the moment in, I wondered: How can teacher educators help prospective and beginning teachers learn to productively struggle through reading and making meaning from challenging "texts" of twenty-first-century classroom events?

In the midst of what was familiar, I found myself seeing – physical surroundings, teachers, the notion of *texts* – anew. Existing spheres of thought about learning to read and learning to teach shifted and connected as I began to imagine how teaching, like reading and writing, is a meaning-making process. What we know about teaching readers how to successfully navigate and make meaning from challenging texts has, in part, come from classroom research capturing the process of how readers read (e.g., Allen, 1995; Beers, 2003; Langer, 1995, 1998;

Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Wilhelm, 1997, 2008, 2016). Is it possible teacher educators might gain insight into the process of learning to teach by studying the meaning-making process of teachers? Though it would take several more years of living the story of teacher education research and practice for me to fully form into words the question I was living in this moment, I also wondered: As an experienced teacher who was becoming a teacher educator and researcher, how do I read and make meaning from beginning teachers learning to teach? As a researcher, how do I *struggle through* reading the complex texts of classroom practice? How might the meanings I make transform my knowledge and experience, help me guide prospective and practicing teachers, and contribute knowledge to my teacher education?

FROM IMAGINING TO EXPLORING

In the two years between conference events, I began to shift my thinking from imagining to exploring teachers as readers of classroom events. I poked the boundaries of existing theories as well as my own unfolding theory, testing the weight of ideas amidst classroom happenings, through exploratory studies, constructing ideas through conversations with teachers and other doctoral candidates, allowing ideas to crystallize long enough to hold them to the light, turn them over, then grow or reshape in light of new influences – including scholarship, classroom events, and everyday life events.

A consistent influence in my thinking was the work of Rosenblatt and the contemporary scholars who utilized her Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing (1978, 1994, 2005, 2019) to explore intersections of research and practice (e.g., Beers, 2003; Wilhelm, 1997, 2016). As a classroom teacher, I read *Literature as* Exploration (1938) and conducted classroom inquiry. I found Rosenblatt's philosophy for literature provided a philosophy for teaching and gave words to still inchoate knowledge I held from teaching students through literature. Rosenblatt's theory and my teaching experiences formed a construct for what I saw happening in my classroom. And so, it was that in the 2006 conference workshop events with Beers, my own teaching and learning experiences began to coalesce with extant theory, research, and scholarship to construct a theoretical framework through which I began to re-see classrooms as complex, dynamic texts teachers (and students) read and write.

Holding the vision of teachers (and students) as readers who attend to and make meaning from the many verbal and nonverbal communicative signs in classrooms, I began exploring through inquiries with prospective and practicing teachers. These inquiries, described in the chapter "Exploring Teachers as Readers and Writers of Classroom Texts: Classroom Literacy as a Framework for Adaptive Expertise," led me to form a tentative theoretical framework for understanding teachers as meaning makers. Both "testing" and exploring a *Classroom Literacy* theoretical framework, I sought to investigate how beginning teachers read and made meaning from classroom events. Seeing myself as a meaning-maker who would be attending to, collecting, reading, analyzing, and

retelling teachers' stories, I also inquired into my own process of making meaning from research events.

As a lived story of narrative inquiry research, this book tells the story of making a theory over time. As such, it also tells, but backgrounds my story as a classroom teacher becoming a teacher educator and educational researcher. More importantly, this book tells the stories of two beginning teachers, Mia and Amy, becoming teachers across the contexts of university methods courses, student teaching, and their first three years of teaching in urban-fringe schools in the southeast United States. Perhaps most importantly, this book captures how individuals read and composed understandings of teaching and learning in relation to one another. Through five years of inquiry with Mia and Amy across classroom places and social spaces, another five years of follow-up conversations, and from 15 years of research and practices teaching prospective and practicing teachers, the Transactional Teaching and Learning (TTL) theory emerged, and continues emerging, from seeking to understand how teachers make meaning from classroom events – the meanings we might call *teaching* and *learning*.

EXPLORING TEACHERS AS READERS AND WRITERS OF CLASSROOM TEXTS: CLASSROOM LITERACY AS A FRAMEWORK FOR ADAPTIVE EXPERTISE

BACKGROUND

What teachers know and can do is has long been understood to be one of the most important influences on student learning (American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, 2018; Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Dewey, 1902; Hammerness et al., 2005; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996; Ping, Schellings, & Beijaard, 2018). Since the 2000s, much attention has been placed on what teachers should know and be able to do. Recent efforts by teacher education programs in Michigan, for instance, have included collaborating to deconstruct highly effective teacher practices in order to teach prospective teachers in teacher education programs. Models for teacher knowledge and practice along with efforts to standardize teacher knowledge and assessment of teacher practices around domains (e.g., Danielson Group, 2022) aim to articulate the relationship of teachers complex knowledge in action within school and classroom settings as well as how teacher learning continues to develop in practice as adaptive expertise. In-depth studies of teachers in practice settings offer insights into the dynamic and complex way effective teachers use their knowledge (e.g., Boney, 2014) to learn from teaching practice (Graham, 2014) and for mentoring student teachers (Payor, 2016). Nevertheless, frameworks for considering *how* teachers use their knowledge in practice or how their knowledge-in-action (Shulman, 1986) contributes to ongoing learning through teaching events or how teachers learn from reflecting on their practice are still needed.

Prospective teachers who graduate from a teacher preparation program have spent four or more years learning and at least two of those years studying how to teach others to learn; however, once in the complex context of the classroom

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(Jackson, 1968, 1990), teachers – especially novice teachers – face the challenge of enacting what they know (Kennedy, 1999; Simon, 1980). As Shulman (1987b) notes, this challenge is exacerbated by the assumptions teachers make about teaching and learning resulting from the 16 or more years that they have already spent thinking about teaching and learning from the perspective of a *student* – in what Lortie (1975) refers to as an "apprenticeship of observation." As has been argued by scholars and teacher educators (e.g., Christenbury, 2006; Shulman, 1986, 1987a, 1987b), the transition from being a student of teaching to becoming a teacher necessitates a shift in thinking, in seeing oneself, and using skills and knowledge – a shift in knowledge, identity, and actions.

WHAT IF? MINDING THE GAP WITH LITERACY LEARNING

As a secondary reading/literacy teacher educator and former classroom teacher, I observed countless instances in which an individual needed instruction to transform existing knowledge for use in new situations. For example, using a known literacy skill or strategy with a new text, context, or for a different purpose are rich opportunities to scaffold a learner's ability to transform understanding in a way that permits successful use of existing, strategic knowledge in new situations. What if building from and extending reading and literacy learning are ways to help prospective and beginning teachers learn to reuse and extend their more generalized literacy abilities for more specific, discipline appropriate situations in teaching? This "What if?" has been the underlying exploratory question guiding my practices with prospective and practicing teachers for more than a decade.

Reading is a key way individuals build knowledge. Through reading, individuals acquire language, and facts, explore perspectives, imagine new possibilities, experience story, learn to empathize, explore, develop a sense of self, others, and the world beyond them. Reading and literacy are fundamental for learning to learn, developing critical consciousness, and for continuous becoming in the world. Literacy is a powerful tool for learning, developing agency, identity, voice, empathy, and democracy (e.g., Freire & Macedo, 1987; Langer, 2011a; Moje, Dillon, & O'Brien, 2000; Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Stouffer, 2016; Rosenblatt, 1938). What if – what is known about learning to read in literacy rich environments, reading to learn from increasingly complex texts, learning specialized knowledge and skills through disciplinary literacy, reading instruction for scaffolding thinking and action in communities of practice – what if these knowns are resources for extending literacy learning to the specialized literacy practices of beginning teaching? What if reading and disciplinary literacy skills may also offer scaffolds for prospective and beginning teachers? Developing metacognition, learning from the mental modeling of a more knowledgeable reader as they read, guided practice utilizing reading strategies well-matched for scaffolding use of background knowledge before teaching, strategic and/or purposeful meaning-making while reading, and opportunities to extend, apply, or synthesize knowledge and meaning made after reading – what if each of these known