

DEVELOPING KNOWLEDGE COMMUNITIES THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS FOR LITERACY

Edited by Chestin T. Auzenne-Curl
and Cheryl J. Craig

ADVANCES IN RESEARCH
ON TEACHING

VOLUME 37

DEVELOPING KNOWLEDGE
COMMUNITIES THROUGH
PARTNERSHIPS FOR LITERACY

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ADVANCES IN RESEARCH ON TEACHING VOLUME 37

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COMMUNITIES THROUGH
PARTNERSHIPS FOR
LITERACY**

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*We dedicate this book to
our parents through whom our stories exist,
our children through whom our stories grow richer,
and to the stories ahead, ready to be told.*

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COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, AND CHANGE: AN INQUIRY INTO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIPS FOR LITERACY EDUCATION IN URBAN CONTEXT

Cheryl J. Craig and Chestin T. Auzenne-Curl

ABSTRACT

Craig and Auzenne-Curl reflect on how their individual experiences and personal practical knowledge developed in context over time contribute to a collective review of the backdrop of the stories of experience shared in this volume. The chapter provides context for the study that inspired the collection and a preview of the chapters yet to come.

Keywords: Urban context; urban education; teacher identity; knowledge communities; education reform; literacy coaching

INTRODUCTION TO THE VOLUME

We hold John Dewey's assertion that articulation and communication are essential elements to a liberated democracy as a truth, and we acknowledge literacy education as vital to social interaction and cohesiveness, education, and life itself (Dewey, as quoted in [Greene, 1982](#)). The chapters in this volume are reflections of this truth. The work is seeded in a three-year study on collaborative professional development for K-12 writing instructors, but as the partnership evolved, we revisited the stories from the field, and in telling and retelling the lived experiences of knowledge-making ([Ross, Chan, & Keyes, 2017](#)), we were guided in inquiry by the following questions:

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- How do knowledge communities support teacher growth and development?
- How do relationships influence the trajectory of professional development programs and teachers' growth in community?
- What do these narratives of experience tell us about the development of individual identity in relation to others?

We have challenged ourselves to engage in a layered conversation about conversation. We consider the impact of narrative authority (Olson, 1995; Olson & Craig, 2001) on the chapters presented here, and we reflect on the importance of literacy education and teacher development through serial interpretation of these accounts (Schwab, 1983). Above all, we hold true that partnerships for the improvement of literacy education are partnerships for the improvement of communication which bears impact on how we navigate both our work and lives. Literacy classrooms are a perfect setting for the study of language as an historic carrier of culture and a disruptor of the same. Hence, the words we speak and the words we write matter.

As editors, we asked ourselves two questions upon entering this work:

- (1) *Through what unique lens did I approach the work preceding this volume?*

A response here requires some reflection on the personal practical knowledge (Clandinin, 1985) accumulated prior to engaging in our three-year cross-institutional research partnership. In many respects, it calls us to determine the hows and whys of our entry into the study and the “whats” of our pre- and post-study knowledge development, which we see as inseparable from the development of our “selves.”

- (2) *What shapes my understanding of the work reflected in the chapters collected here?*

This second question delves more deeply into the relational aspects of our work with one another and with our community of contributing authors. The questions within this question include considerations for not only the professional roles and standards associated with each of our titles but also the less frequently addressed considerations of age, race, gender, socioeconomic background, and intra- and international cultural history, which is both intentionally and unintentionally shaping our work.

In the following sections, we (Chestin T. Auzenne-Curl and Cheryl J. Craig as co-researchers and co-authors) respond to the aforementioned questions.

Cheryl's Story: Comprehensive School Reform in Greater Houston

I came to the work involving the WITS (Writers in the Schools) Collaborative with over 20 years of experience conducting research in Greater Houston's public schools. The largest initiative over that continuum of time was the Houston Annenberg Challenge reform movement, a \$60 million change effort meant to improve Houston's urban campuses over a five-year period. I was invited to work with 5 of the 11 lead schools and served as the formal evaluator at a sixth lead

campus. Later, I was invited to conduct research on four other campuses chosen for the second tier of funding by the Houston A+ reform movement. The previous experiences I brought with me to this WITS reform endeavor taught me a plethora of lessons about change. One was that the vast majority of campuses and educators are genuinely engaged in it but there are those who participate in name only. The main thing I learned – through hard-wrought experience – is that bureaucrats and philanthropies cannot make educators do anything; teachers and principals must commit to making changes themselves. The same goes for students. Despite grand claims to the contrary, change can only happen one person at a time.

When I first moved to Houston from Western Canada, I was shocked by the educational disparities that existed between different students and schools. While I knew that the segregation and desegregation of public schools had happened, I did not know how phenomena had played out over time. One might say I arrived in Houston with book knowledge only....

While working with the Houston Annenberg Challenge schools, their lived reality deepened my understanding of what had transpired. Two of the campuses with which I worked were still under an unresolved court order for their school district's failure to segregate properly. One of those campuses, Hardy Academy (Author Tim Martindell's school), had two reforms in it, both driven by private interest groups (philanthropy, business-led group). I was taken aback by these developments as well. In Canada, private interest groups would not have open access to public school systems. The Annenberg reform movement, on one hand, wanted to improve students' educational experiences and open up a full range of career possibilities to them. The business-directed change effort, on the other hand, wanted to prepare Hardy's mostly students of color to become workers in local oil and gas industries. This set up a "dueling banjos" scenario with the Hardy teachers being less willing to comply with the latter reform agenda. Resentment predictably built. The Hardy teachers rebelled against the heavy-handed business change proposition. The business reformers subsequently moved on to campuses more vulnerable than Hardy, schools with less-strong teacher defenses.

A second thing that stood out to me was the Annenberg reform designated funding for elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools. The initial Houston Annenberg awards did not take into account that one elementary school had 600+ students, one middle school had 1,500 students, and one high school had 125 students. That small high school, Destiny High School, received more funding than all the large elementary and middle schools and an equivalent amount to Eagle High School, which had 3,500 students. The fact that Destiny High School had the least number of students of color made the situation even more egregious. After the first year, the reform funding formula changed and became prorated by the number of students per campus. However, I always wondered why leadership believed the flawed funding formula would have been appropriate in the first place. Also, I discovered a backroom deal favoring the small high school as well. On the whole, I learned that private groups entering schools may have agendas flying beneath the radar that may not be in the interest of all public schools and all children.

Then, there were the stories that students told. At one elementary campus, a primary Latinx girl told her teacher about waking in the night to find “a rat on her tummy.” When I spoke with the principal about what the child said, he shook his head woefully, saying that some neighborhood homes had dirt floors and tales like this were not out of the ordinary. Later on, during the Houston A+ Challenge, a Grade 3 boy was disciplined for being late first thing in the morning for practice testing for the state exams. When a trail of roaches was later found in the school – and that trail led to the young boy’s backpack – it was discovered that he and another youth had been left alone for three weeks while their parents were away on a work trip. When the teachers heard this news, they wept. They said if they talked to students when they first arrived at school rather than testing them, they would have a better chance of troubleshooting difficult situations. And, at Eagle High School, a few blocks away, I conversed with a female student of color. After seeing me around the campus several times, she stopped me in the hallway, begging me to adopt her as her clothing had become too small and she needed right-size clothes. These student narratives, among many others, have stuck to me like glue since I first encountered them. Together, they have awakened me to experiences I never imagined possible. In many ways, they are the stories behind the statistics, the narratives that are able to bring about human change in ways that numbers – devoid of moral push and purpose (Bruner, 1986) – never could or never can.

Finally, I must say something about the reminder of the public schools located in Greater Houston. No extra funding was assigned to them, if they were not in the first rounds of awards. Many attending these remaining schools were also students living in challenging circumstances with food anxieties, among other urgent needs. These campuses also had exceedingly high turnover rates of teachers. In an article published after the Houston Annenberg Challenge reform movement ended, I reported that 80% of the teachers in the largest school district in Greater Houston had 5 years or less in experience and 50% of the administrators in the same school district had 5 years or less of experiences (Craig, 2014).

Consequently, when I entered the WITS work, I knew that both teacher experience and principal experience in the large school district were precariously thin. I also knew there were a very large number of children and young adults, mostly of color, who had extremely high needs. Therefore, it did not surprise me that WITS received dedicated funding from a local philanthropy to assist Greater Houston’s most challenged schools with students’ literacy development. Entering into a partnership agreement with WITS, I knew much more was needed than money poured into a project that other people would have to live. At the same time, I recognized that WITS could be part of a lifeline that was so desperately needed and so obviously missing.

Chestin’s Story: How Educators Negotiate Identity in Education?

I approach this work, Black, female, cis-gendered, and from a middle-class Southern American upbringing – an author, an educator, and a mother. Born in the ‘80s and raised in the ‘90s, my experiences in school were impacted by factors including tracking, socioeconomic and racial resegregation through redistricting,

and high accountability performance measures of standardized testing. I was identified and labeled gifted early on. This placed me in a social incubator of sorts. I had classes with the same classmates, under the direction of the most trusted teachers at each grade level for most of my educational career. I was also usually the only person of color in my classes.

To travel back a bit, I was a junior in high school when I was first introduced to the idea that being a writer and an educator was mutually exclusive. It came from my beloved English teacher from the year prior. I told her about how I would major in Literature. I thought it would make her proud, because she was truly a light in my life. Her classroom was a place in which I grieved the loss of my grandmother on page after college-rule page in my journal. I was safe in that class. It was in that classroom that I came to understand, as Joan Didion said, that “I write to know what I think, and in which I first pondered that others might do the same.” Of course, we wrote some of the more prescriptive, extended analyses on the work of Steinbeck, Fitzgerald, and Shakespeare, but those I cannot remember. What I carry with me now is the sense of freedom I found in my journal. It held my voice, and when the teacher read excerpts from our journals, she always gave enough feedback to guide us in perfecting craft, but never a grade. She made it clear that these journals were *our* places, and we invited her in. She dared not overstep into a judgment. She made it seem that we honored her by allowing her to share in our worlds. So, you may imagine that hearing her say to me, “Please don’t let them convince you to teach. You are a writer; not a teacher.” quite shocked me. She said, “Remember that. It’s your gift.”

I stood, smiling in clinch-toothed confusion and replied “Of course” only to have her belabor, “A writer, Chestin.” And so my wondering began. “How, exactly, could I prove her wrong, respectfully?” So much of this book aims to do so. In fact, I do not believe that it is possible to separate one’s sense of self as an author from the reality that we want to be heard and thus hope to provoke thought. All writing is a lesson in something. Our teacher selves and our writer selves reflect a negotiation of “being and becoming” through the sameness of each role. Perhaps the teacher seeks most often to encourage this behavior outside of self, while the author searches most frequently within. Ruth Vinz in the literacy area underscored that preservice literacy teachers, like their students, are being and becoming as they learn alongside one another while engaged in reading and writing; this was true for me, and across my career I have noted the same truth for literacy leaders. It is their classroom teaching experience that shapes their interactions with their peers as they enter the role of teacher educator in the field. It was the same for me.

I began my teaching career in the very classroom that inspired me to teach. My teacher was moving to the Austin area and I was her replacement. I did remember her words. I was a writer. I majored in literature with an emphasis in writing and planned on teaching for three years in order to pay for law school, but when I stepped into the classroom which had been stripped bare of all resources, I knew I was called to teach. I covered the profanity on the cork board with borders and fabric and thought of the difference that I could make in that very special room.

I was not met with a warm welcome by my colleagues. They felt that my major in literature left me ill-equipped to manage a classroom and were shocked when

that proved false. My first year teaching brought me recognition from the central office staff and most importantly from my students. I still wondered if my fellow teachers had a point, and so I began to reflect on what it meant to be a teacher. *Was it coursework? Was it conditioning? Was it on the job training?* By year two, I had spent minimal time concerned with the state writing assessment, but I had worked to make sure that I understood it enough to prepare my students. I was surprised to find out that by year three, my students, none of whom were advanced-placement or honors students, earned the highest passing rate in the district and the highest campus percentage for essays with distinguished state recognition. So I was called upon, by the campus Dean of Instruction, to become a mentor when I still needed one. She did not leave me without guidance. She attended many professional development sessions with me and we always debriefed. She asked me: *How did you feel about that training and why? What are some specific things that you heard the facilitator say about “insert topic”? If you were leading this session what would you want to do differently? What would you hope people would leave with?* I journaled about our meetings and dedicated time to applying the responses to my view as a mentor.

For me, this idea of professional being and becoming is heavily wrought in an examination of language and it led me to focus my broader research lens on qualitative methodology. Throughout my career, I questioned the stories that intersect in truth and how those intersections shape who we are. America’s beloved female philosopher Maxine Greene (deceased) wrote that we are always in the making and never made. With this in mind, my evolving research body consistently centers the participant in context. It rarely excludes me from work as a participant observer in study. The questions which permeate my analyses of work on the education landscape are: *Who are we? How do the commonplaces in which we exist shape our journey? How are we shaped by the experiences of others with whom we share physical and abstract space? What can be gained by a sharing of self and personal journey when we enter into a community of reflective practice?*

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Every contributing author in this volume is a teacher. Though for some of us, our classroom walls have been made virtual, and for others, a classroom has become an auditorium, while others travel to conferences across the globe to share, our unifying identity is that of educator of different kinds. In beginning with our likeness, we address the following theoretical foundations of this volume.

Storied Experience

In her 2013 volume, *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry*, Jean Clandinin (2013a, p. 21) ushers readers into the process of inquiry with a quote from Nigerian poet and novelist Ben Okri. A portion of it deeply resonated with us:

One way or another we are living the stories
Planted in us early or along the way,
Or we are also living the stories we planted—
Knowingly or unknowingly—in ourselves
We live stories that either give our lives meaning
or negate it with meaninglessness.
If we change the stories we live by,
Quite possibly we change our lives.

This notion of living “by” and “in” stories calls us to be narrative inquirers. Cheryl, as a student of Jean, and Chestin, as a student of Cheryl, hold true that narrative is both a methodology by which to conduct research and a natural phenomenon to be studied in the field.

In entering a study, we “think narratively” (Clandinin, 2013b; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) alongside our participants to gain insights into their lived experiences. Our interpretations and wonderings are influenced by serial interpretation (Schwab, 1978a, 1978b) of themes repeated and divergent in the stories with which we interact.

The field of educational research often reports data with an inclination toward measurement in solely quantitative methods, but we believe that in order to move from measurement to change, a deeper degree of exploration is necessary. The worlds of theory and practice align in research that highlights “the particulars” (Schwab, 1969). Those seemingly minute elements that influence the numbers lend themselves to fuller exploration. They are revealed in the voices of practitioners. Narrative discourse in education amplifies them, and we study them with a Deweyan lens of three-dimensional experience which explores each event as relevant to time (past-present-future), place (context), and interaction (relationships). A study of words and interactions, *through words and interactions*, made literacy education a perfect ground for these methods (Dewey, 1938).

Knowledge Communities and the Value of Personal Practical Knowledge

Highlighting the importance of reflective, experiential learning through the use of narrative inquiry, Cheryl has contributed a particularly relevant stem to the methodological narrative tree. Her work reflects the lives of teachers and the contextualized knowledge communities (Craig, 1995, 2007; Craig, Curtis, Kelley, Martindell, & Perez, 2020) in which they live and grow. Our work with the WITS organization shed light on professional development efforts for transforming literacy practices as “originating events” (Craig, 2007) for several intricately connected knowledge communities. As the chapters in this book reveal, the assigned groups were not always the center of the truest knowledge transfer, but they frequently seeded interactions that led to the development of organically formed communities where personal practical knowledge coupled with collegiality formed lasting relationships and professional support. In these knowledge communities, much discussion focused on navigating the dilemmas within the workspace, and

pedagogical risk-taking influenced change inside and outside of the classroom. We were able to note these and other resonances through the study of stories shared with us.

THE INQUIRY IN CONTEXT

We hear about declining literacy; it has become a fact of life – a drab presence, simply there. We look for scapegoats; teachers, of course; disintegrating families; shiftless children.... What do we mean by literacy? What is it for? –Maxine Greene

Though the quote above is nearly 40 years old upon the time of this publication, it resonates loudly with the present-day discourse surrounding literacy education. Our first with Tina and Maryann was an informal conversation on the same topics. They were administrators in the WITS Collaborative, and we were members of the Texas A&M University Research Team. The WITS Team was looking for a new approach to program evaluation. Their previous structure seemed maligned with their programmatic goals. So we ventured into a casual conversation with strong echoes of the views and questions that Greene expresses in *Literacy for What?* (1982).

Place

Texas is know2n for high accountability measures for standardized testing and also for poor performance in reading and writing by its own standards. During our partnership with WITS Houston, the state of Texas’ average reading scores for third and eighth grade were at 40.5% and 48%. Writing scores, which is assessed in grades 4 and 7, were at 59.5% and 45.5% (Figs. 1 and 2).

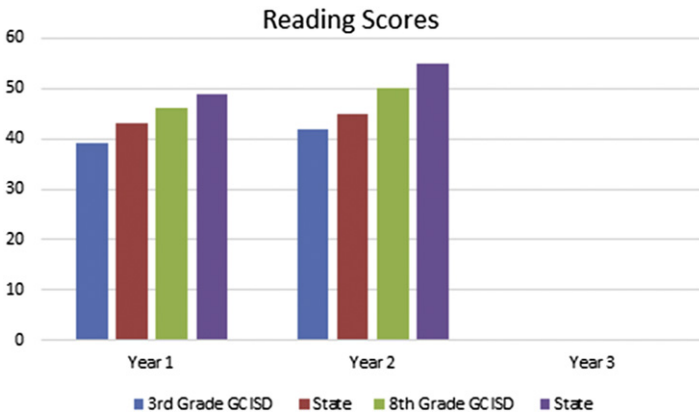


Fig. 1. Greater City ISD Reading Scores.