Writing a Literacy Dissertation: Looking Back, Looking Forward

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These are papers from a panel session that focused on research by four University of Georgia doctoral students and introduction from their dissertation chair. Ira Aaron provides a brief reaction to the papers.

Introduction to Writing a Literacy Dissertation

Donna E. Alvermann

Gone are the days when a doctoral student’s committee members could expect with a fairly high degree of certainty that the dissertation presented for defense would include five chapters (introduction, literature review, data collection methods, analysis, and implications). Also largely absent among literacy teacher educators are any expectations that the dissertation will conform to a particular methodology narrowly defined and conceptualized. Instead, committees are increasingly working with students whose interests and expertise in scholarly inquiry allow them to experiment with a wide range of methodologies embedded in multiple theoretical perspectives. Their choices in analytic methods and representational formats also vary considerably, ranging from those grounded in postpositivism to poststructuralism.

What these changes in writing a literacy dissertation suggest is that more and more professors of literacy teacher education who serve on doctoral committees are (or soon will be) experiencing a re-education of significant proportions. So great are these changes, in fact, that Nell Duke and her colleagues (Duke & Beck, 1999; Duke & Mallette, 2001) have put forth a call for institutional and faculty support in preparing new literacy professionals for positions in higher education. Specifically, they argue that such preparation “should change in response to the growing diversification of epistemologies and methods employed in literacy research” (Duke & Mallette, 2001, p. 345). It was this argument and its implications for literacy teacher educators that largely influenced us—Jennifer, Jonathan, Leslie, George, and Donna—to propose a session for the 2002 ARF program that would reflect the growing diversity in dissertation writing. We decided that in keeping with the theme of the conference (Looking Back, Looking Forward), it would be advantageous to add Ira’s voice to the mix. As the founder of the Reading Education Department at the University of Georgia, Ira was in a unique position. We needed his perspective.
Participants

It should be noted that George, Leslie, and Jennifer have since graduated with a Ph.D. in reading education from the University of Georgia and have taken positions as assistant professors at universities across the United States. Jonathan is in his third year of doctoral study at the University of Georgia at the time of this writing. The participants’ four dissertations (both completed and proposed) make use of a range of theoretical frameworks and analyses, including a socionaturalist narrative on the bio-ecological dynamics of reading and literacy development (George), a study of four Korean-English biliterate students’ literacy practices (Jennifer), an analysis of the multiliteracies of thru-hikers (Leslie), and a multiliteracies framework for examining how visual and spatial texts are appropriated for various ideological purposes (Jonathan). As the doctoral students’ supervisor, I have been on faculty at the University of Georgia since 1982 and have witnessed firsthand the changes in students’ interests and expertise alluded to earlier.

Data Sources and Methods

In discussing their alternative approaches to framing and writing their dissertations at the 2002 ARF meeting, Jennifer, George, Leslie, and Jonathan cumulatively relied on the following data sources for their write-ups: reviews of the current research and theory in psychology, anthropology, cognitive science, linguistics, and philosophy of mind, particularly work informed by conceptual advances in the life sciences; data from Korean and English language samples collected from children’s literacy practices in their homes, church, and schools; artifacts, observations, field notes, interviews, and journals collected while hiking the Appalachian Trail; and photographs, field notes, and interviews collected at an archaeological site and museum in Mexico City. They also commented on the problems they faced in designing a hybrid conceptual-manuscript dissertation (George), representing bilingual data for a monolingual doctoral committee (Jennifer), creating appropriate tools for analyzing data from an ethnography conducted while hiking the Appalachian Trail (Leslie), and conducting multimodal literacy research at an archaeological site in Mexico City (Jonathan). The analyses they used and the interpretations they drew are part and parcel of the reports that follow.

References


The socionaturalist narrative: An approach to the bio-ecological dynamics of reading and literacy development

George Hruby

Dissertation Form

The socionaturalist narrative (Hruby, 2002) is a conceptual-manuscript dissertation, a hybrid of two dissertation forms, neither of which is commonly employed in reading and literacy research theses. To my knowledge, no one in our field has ever attempted such a hybrid form. Thus, this dissertation is an experiment in form as well as substance. But the form does allow for a unique demonstration of the substance. It demonstrates the first two of the three hopes for the conceptual argument: that a body of work in life science-informed social science, here termed socionaturalism, can be conceptually, professionally, and pedagogically useful in reading and literacy education research.

Conceptual dissertations consist of a thesis, or rational argument, in the form of a philosophical essay on some particular theoretical question. Broad reviews of the literature are usually included, and extensive analysis and extension of key corollaries to the axioms and categories generated by the question are examined. The number of chapters is indeterminate. Manuscript dissertations are commonly employed in the natural sciences. They consist of two or more papers, usually research reports, prepared and submitted to, and preferably published by, scholarly, peer-reviewed journals. A simple introduction, literature review (complementary but not redundant to the literature reviews already contained in the individual papers), and a conclusion bracket these manuscripts, followed by a reference list and any other materials as necessary. Experimental attempts at manuscript dissertations in teacher education have sometimes been called portfolio dissertations.

A conceptual-manuscript dissertation is a manuscript dissertation where the manuscript chapters are not merely presented at face value (although they can be read that way, too), but are part of a larger argument set up by introductory conceptual chapters. The manuscript chapters in such a hybrid dissertation may provide the extension of the argument, or they may, as in The Socionaturalist Narrative, provide exemplars for the argument.

Overview of the Chapters’ Content

There are ten chapters to this particular conceptual-manuscript hybrid dissertation, a reference list, and an appendix. Chapters 1-4, and 10 are the conceptual portions of the dissertation. Chapters 5 through 9 are the manuscript chapters. The conceptual chapters argue for a unique theoretical framework (the socionaturalist narrative) with which to inform reading and literacy research. The manuscript chapters are examples of how this unique perspective can be employed, either as a central theme or as a subtext, in publishable scholarship.

How to conceive of an epistemologically coherent, and metaphysically grounded theoretical framework, or paradigm (Chapter 2), why we in reading and literacy need a new paradigm when we clearly have at least two already (Chapter 3), what the unique theoretical
framework I propose looks like (Chapter 4), and what it could mean for reading and literacy education (Chapter 10), are the contents of the conceptual portion of the dissertation. These chapters demonstrate why socionaturalism could prove conceptually useful for our field. The manuscript chapters are all informed by socionaturalism to some extent, and the fact that all have seen print in peer-reviewed journals, or edited volumes, demonstrates that there is some professional value in this perspective.

To describe the chapters in greater detail: Following this introductory overview, Chapter 2 briefly reviews the conceptual history of developmental psychology and how historians of that field employed Stephen Pepper’s theory of world hypotheses (Bornstein & Lamb, 1999; Learner, 2002; Overton & Reese 1973; Pepper, 1948; Reese & Overton, 1970) to make some sense of it. The history of developmental psychology is found to share certain interesting similarities with the history of reading and literacy education research. But while developmental psychology has moved beyond its paradigm debates, we in reading and literacy education have not. In this chapter I review how developmental psychology got past its nature-nurture controversy in the 1970s, and give Pepper’s theory some of the credit. (For ease of reading, I have located the details of Pepper’s philosophy of science in an appendix.)

In Chapter 3, the history of reading and literacy education research is reviewed, and compared to that of developmental psychology. The paradigm debates are also noted as are the recommendation by some that we lighten up on theory and get back to pragmatic research (e.g., Dillon, O’Brien & Heilman, 2000; Kamil, 1995; Stanovich, 2000). I argue just the opposite, that we need more theory to complement our research, in particular metatheoretical analyses, and demonstrate how Pepper’s theory of world hypotheses can be applied to making sense of the theoretical reading and literacy education landscape.

In Chapter 4, socionaturalism is described in greater detail as a truly organicist-contextualist perspective. Several central concepts, including emergence, transaction, structural-functional analyses, and adaptation are explained in some detail. Empirical and theoretical advances that illustrate these themes are drawn from several of the developmental sciences.

Chapter 5 is the first of five previously published manuscripts. “Cognition and the mind” (Hruby, 1999b), a review of Eric Jensen’s Teaching with the brain in mind, is a simple book review from Roeper Review, a journal of gifted education. The topic of the book reviewed is neuroscience research and its implications for improved teaching practice. It is not a complimentary review. But note the first sentence of the last paragraph: “It may be hoped that both the current coalescing of the neurosciences and the naturalistic turn in philosophy of mind bode well for an eventual neo-naturalistic framework for educational research” (p. 327). I was aware of moves to tie philosophy of mind and the neurosciences together—they had been going on since the 1980s. There was a lot of coalescing going on in computer science, neural network modeling, complexity theory, evolutionary and ecological psychology, and cognitive ethology, too. Neo-naturalism was my general handle for all of this, which I refer to in this dissertation as socionaturalism.

Chapter 6 was originally entitled “The biofunctional theory of knowledge and ecologically informed education research” (Hruby, 2000a) from a special double issue of the
Journal of Mind and Behavior on Ali Iran-Nejad’s bio-functional theory of cognition and learning (Iran-Nejad, 1999). In my brief review, I compare Iran-Nejad’s theory to the ecological theory of perception held by J. J. Gibson. Still, in the last two paragraphs, I first suggested one of the central ideas in socionaturalism.

Perhaps knowledge and understanding are not about the mechanics of data processing, but about the organic development of epigenetic, ontogenetic, and phylogenetic adaptations to an ecological surround (Bidell and Fischer, 1997; Hendriks-Jansen, 1996; Michel and Moore, 1995). Perhaps knowledge is not about the algebraic manipulation of representations, but about the meaningfulness inherent in the organism’s relationship to its perceived world (Bruner, 1990; Clancey, 1997; Neisser, 1993). But an understanding of understanding, as Iran-Nejad suggests, requires a disciplinarily integrative approach that is “wholetheme” in nature, that relates, in other words, to the many aspects of our perceived ecological surround—a surround at once physical, biological, psychosocial, cultural, linguistic, personal, sensory and symbolic (Hruby, 2000a, p. 102).

Chapter 7, originally published as “Sociological, postmodern, and ‘new realism’ perspectives in social constructionism: Implications for reading research” (Hruby, 2001a), from Reading Research Quarterly, examines the topic of social constructionism. I review its history and application in reading and literacy research. Although this work may seem to have little to do with socionaturalism, the new realist and neo-naturalist perspectives described in this article as third wave social constructionism are clearly philosophically related to it. Indeed, socionaturalism presumes a neo-realist social constructionism.

Contrary to what many brain-based education promoters (and even some cognitive neuroscientists) seem to think, the neurosciences are not epistemologically unrestrained, and if we in the reading and literacy community are ever going to make sense of their research, we are going to need a coherent theoretical frame by which to do so. The neurosciences are not the only area that requires theoretical framing, however. So does educational technology research. Chapter 8 appeared in Reading Research and Instruction as “The descent of Internet publications: A review of literacy journals online” (Hruby, 2001b). Don Leu, the guest editor of a special technology issue of that publication, invited this review. Using evolutionary theory to interpret the development of different textual forms is the perspective I employed. See especially the section subtitled “Problems with the evolutionary analogy” for an obvious tie-in to socionaturalism.

Chapter 9 was the keynote address paper published in the Yearbook of the American Reading Forum, 2000 and entitled “The social construction of literacy development and classroom ecologies” (Hruby, 2001c). This is based on the keynote address I presented that year at the Sannibel Island, Florida, conference as a last-minute stand-in, since P. David Pearson was unable to present due to illness (Hruby 2000b). This paper lays out much of the argument of the conceptual chapters of this dissertation, especially those found in Chapter 3.

Chapter 10 concludes the dissertation by retracing the dissertation’s argument, and asserting its success. It then looks forward conceptually and methodologically toward future research. Exploratory definitions of “reading,” language, learning, meaning, comprehension,
representation, and communication are offered, and their implications for reading research offered.

References


Dealing with Bilingual Texts in a Dissertation

Jennifer Moon Ro

Recently, I was at the local library fingering through the rows of books and reading occasional titles when I realized that I was no longer reading English, but Korean text. I stepped back, and there they were, several rows of Korean books in the middle of English books. Dueling thoughts came to mind; one that these Korean books looked rather disruptive and out of place alongside English titles, and the other that just of moment ago I was able to read these titles as smoothly as I had read the ones in English. I realize that not everyone will have the second thought that I had. This is a simple example of how having access to two languages influence the way I read, react, and interact with text. Being bilingual is sometimes disruptive to the taken-for-granted flow of life lived by those who do not have to ‘deal’ with two languages. This is a long way of explaining why I decided to include Korean texts in my dissertation.

My dissertation (Ro, 2002) involved an in-depth look into four Korean-English biliterate students’ literacy practices in their multiple contexts (home, school, and church). Many of the previous studies with biliterate students have addressed mostly isolated reading skills (Bialystok, 1997; Droop & Verhoeven, 1998; Durgunoglu, Nagy, & Hancin-Bhatt, 1993; Koda, 1996; among others). However, to perceive literacy as only a cognitive set of skills mean that the social contexts wherein these literacy practices are utilized and have meaning are never explored. The underlying notion behind my study was that literacy is a social practice (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 1999; Hull, 2000). According to Hull, literacy is viewed as “social,” as it is “connected to activities wherein people read and write and talk about texts, hold certain attitudes and values about them…” (p. 4). Under the social theory of literacy, different literacy practices exist among the different groups of people rather than a set of skills in individuals.

I collected data in both Korean and English in each of my participants’ three contexts. Being biliterate, I was in a convenient position to record their spoken and written uses in both languages. Under the social theory of literacy, I felt that it was especially important to record exactly what the participants said and wrote because the subtle nuances and meaning may get lost in the translation. Therefore, when writing field notes or analyzing them, the data made sense to me. It was not until I began thinking about writing-up the findings for my monolingual committee did I realize I will have to deal with the problem of representing bilingual materials to a monolingual audience. After consulting with a linguistic professor in my committee, I decided to keep the Korean text in the dissertation. I was at first concerned that the foreign texts that have no meaning for the committee might turn them off to reading it. After all, the Korean alphabet looks drastically different from English. Therefore, including Korean text would be more disruptive to the flow than with Spanish text. Then I thought beyond the present committee-audience, to where there will be individuals who will be able to read Korean texts. As future literacy research will potentially involve texts other than English, I felt that literacy professionals may benefit by becoming more accustomed to research including multiple texts.

The influence of technology has dramatically changed the way we disseminate professional literature. As a graduate student at the University of Georgia, I spent many hours standing in the library searching for articles and books. As an assistant professor at my
institution, I am encouraged to rely on electronic journals. In fact, anyone who subscribes to databases that store literature on literacy is able to access it from the comfort of his or her home. Therefore, in the future, our literature may be read by an audience that extends beyond our English-speaking countries.

Including Korean texts in an English dissertation is not unlike including samples of email messages written by a participant or including students’ writing samples with their non-conventional spellings. Including the original Korean texts with pronunciations of the word, coupled with the translation is a more authentic representation. It allows the able reader to readily assess my interpretation of the data by reading the original text. The three forms of representation (Korean texts, pronunciation, and translation) of the same text unit made sense to me as I wrote around those examples. If I had decided to not include the original Korean text, it would not make much sense to me or to future readers who are knowledgeable with Korean text. When I came across a dissertation study about the language use of Korean-English bilingual children, I was surprised to find that the author had not included any original Korean text (Baek, 1992). Ironically, I found it more difficult to read the study because I was never certain to which Korean words (written as pronunciations with translation) she was referring. Therefore, I felt that including original Korean texts used by my participants was necessary.

Deciding to include Korean text into my dissertation meant that I had to ‘deal’ with practical problems that came along with it. For instance, I had to replace my MS Word with a Korean version of the MS Word program. With the Korean MS Word program, I was able to type both Korean and English texts. However, this was not as easy to do as I first thought. I had to first affix a Korean alphabet sticker onto each of the keys on the keyboard. With the push of the “ALT” key, I was able to switch back and forth from Korean and English letters. However, to my frustration, the “ALT” key did not work on certain keys on the keyboard, and so, when I wanted to type in English, unwanted Korean letters popped onto the screen. Problems with using Korean texts continued during the final stages of the dissertation process. The year that I graduated was the first year where dissertations were to be submitted to the Graduate School in electronic form. The Graduate School’s computer did not have a Korean language program installed and my Korean text appeared on the screen scrambled when my dissertation file was viewed. After a few agonizing hours, the problem was resolved, I was able to submit my electronic dissertation (with the Korean text intact) successfully, and I graduated.

To return to my current state of life: I am regularly ‘disrupted’ by living in a world of two languages and ‘dealing’ with issues that arise. Not a day goes by when I am not reminded of my two linguistic backgrounds. My daughter has grown since my dissertation writing days. She is beginning to speak and experiment with writing. I am often asked in what language is she speaking her first words or in what language is she beginning to scribble on the walls. I answer, “I don’t know. It seems to me to be both, but I cannot be certain.” She, too, seems to be taking her time to sort through the two sets of phonemes and dealing with her first issue with living in a world of two languages. My hope as a teacher, researcher, and a mother is that not only will she be ready to live in her biliterate world, but that the world will be ready in practical ways to embrace her biliteracy.
References


Full Circle: A Personal/Research Story

Leslie Rush

One important aspect of qualitative research is that the person of the researcher is key. Eisner (1998) describes this as one of the most important features of qualitative studies: “the self as an instrument” (p. 33). In other words, researchers develop sensitivity to a situation that enables us to be able to see what is important in that situation, based on our background, our subjectivities (Peshkin, 1988). There are two aspects of my background that are important to know, in the context of understanding my choices regarding my dissertation, my current employment, my research interests, and this article: I am a long-time avid backpacker, and I taught high school English for 12 years. When I moved to Georgia to pursue doctoral studies at the University of Georgia, it didn’t take long until I began to hear stories about the Appalachian Trail (AT). Thru-hikers, they were called, those people who hiked all 2,160 miles of the AT, and legends about them in Georgia are numerous. I was intrigued and fascinated. I began to think about how I could work in a thru-hike of the AT with finishing my degree and getting a job. It seemed to me that the best time to pursue this dream would be after graduation. However, I also wanted to get a job in academia; I wanted to be involved in teaching and research. I couldn’t imagine going to my (as yet fictional) department head and saying, “Thanks very much for the job offer. I’ll take it. Only first, I’ll be backpacking for six months along the Appalachian corridor.”

So one day, jokingly, a fellow graduate student said to me, “Well, you could do research on the literacy practices of Appalachian Trail thru-hikers.” We laughed. I told a few others about my “new” dissertation topic, and we all laughed together; one, a fellow student who is an exceptionally intense and deep thinker, came back to me the next day and said, “You know, Leslie, you could do that. You could thru-hike the AT and study the literacies of thru-hikers.” So that’s what I did. My dissertation research (Rush, 2002) concerned the multiliteracies and social practices of the community of thru-hikers, and during the six months that I collected data, I was also part of the community, hiking 1400 miles of the AT in the process.

In this article I’m going to be sharing with you some of the issues that developed as I was planning for and carrying out my research, as well as some consequences that I have had to deal with as a result of what one of my committee members called “edgy” research. All of these issues have to do with two elements of my identity: that I am a backpacker; and that I am an academic/classroom teacher. They also spring from my attempt to do research that incorporates both the notion of cultural impacts on literacy and a broad definition of literacy that goes beyond spoken and written texts.

Combining Personal and Research Goals

During both data collection and analysis, but especially important during data collection, was the struggle that I went through to make decisions as both a thru-hiker and a researcher. Rather than viewing these as two separate entities, I see this double identity as occurring on a continuum. Throughout my research and thru-hike, I slid back and forth along this continuum in both my thinking and my actions, sometimes favoring my thru-hiking ambitions and at other
times favoring my research ambitions. Occasionally, I had to rethink the balance of these two identities because of their impact on my research and my body.

Gaining formal access to the thru-hiker community was not difficult, as no institutional entity grants permission to thru-hike; the trail is open to any who choose to use it. Like other thru-hikers, I spent several months planning and preparing for my hike, and when the time came for me to head out, I simply left home and started hiking. I chose to hike northbound, because a larger proportion of thru-hikers choose this route. Gaining informal access, becoming a member of the community of thru-hikers, was a little more complicated.

As a member of the thru-hiking community I adopted trail traditions, such as taking trail names – the nicknames that most thru-hikers adopt during their hikes. I gave myself the trail name “Turtle,” based on a necklace with a jade turtle given to me by a friend a few days before I left. Along with this gift came a card describing the turtle as a symbol of persistence and connection to the earth. I knew that if I wanted to spend six months hiking, I would need perseverance and I hoped that I would become more connected to the earth. I also realized that my hiking pace was going to be a slow one, so the name Turtle seemed appropriate. From the first days of my hike, I introduced myself by this name, and it is as Turtle that I was known for most of my thru-hike. Having a trail name was an important part of being a member of the thru-hiking community.

I also participated in the common practice of reading and writing in shelter registers: blank notebooks left in shelters, in which hikers write their thoughts about the day, communicate with other hikers, draw pictures, etc.

Of course, I was not the only person trying to be part of the community. We were all learning together how best to do this thing we had committed to doing. We learned together about the best way to set up our tents, to pack our gear, to hang bear bags, cook food, clean up, use privies, feed our bodies, and hike. We traded ideas on light but calorie-heavy food items, pieces of gear that would make life easier, such as alcohol stoves to replace white gas stoves, and most of all, we began the trail-long process of getting rid of unnecessary weight in our backpacks.

Throughout the remainder of my thru-hiking experience, I continued these practices: viewing myself as part of the community of thru-hikers, using my own and others’ trail names, signing into shelter registers, and socializing with other hikers. Most importantly, perhaps, I continued to hike north along with other members of the thru-hiking community.

My process of gaining informal access seemed to be fairly smooth and easy. I planned to thru-hike the entire Appalachian Trail, I was in company with others hiking the same trail, I participated in the community’s traditions and ways, and thus I was part of the community. Ultimately, however, the smoothness of my identification with the community of thru-hikers began to backfire. As I began to become more physically fit and capable of hiking longer and longer days, I began to fall in with one of the thru-hiking community’s strongest values: high-mileage days. Originally, I had planned to average 8 miles a day for the first two weeks, 10 miles a day for the next two weeks, and then 12 miles a day for the remainder of my hike. After about
a month, I found myself pushing for more and more miles every day, so that by the beginning of May, I was averaging 16 miles a day. These added miles meant more time spent hiking, which left less time and energy for writing fieldnotes and analyzing data. During the last few days of April and the first 2 days of May, I paid little attention to my role as a researcher. I took no fieldnotes, talked to no one about my research, and began to think of myself as a thru-hiker, and only a thru-hiker.

In early May, my body saved me and saved my research by rebelling. Climbing a steep set of stone steps out of Laurel Gorge, Tennessee, I pulled a muscle in my buttocks, which put pressure on the sciatic nerve, shooting excruciating pain down my right leg. I got a lift into the nearest town, Damascus, Virginia, and spent several days there attempting to get medical help and to handle the continuing and increasing pain, until I finally decided that the pain was unbearable. By May 5th, I was off the trail, perhaps, or so I thought, for good.

During a month and a half of recuperation, physical therapy, and thought, I began to see that by identifying so strongly with the community of thru-hikers, I had neglected the research that had brought me there in the first place. The goal of reaching Katahdin – the northernmost terminus of the AT -- had overshadowed my desire to learn about the multiliteracies of thru-hikers. This forced reminder of my two goals helped me to begin to balance them more carefully. When I returned to the trail in mid-June, I skipped a 400-mile section of the trail in Virginia. This was done partly to give me a chance to make it to Katahdin before it closed in mid-October and also to keep hiking with other thru-hikers that I had known before I was injured. After skipping this section, I knew that I would not be able to hike the entire trail. This knowledge helped alleviate some of the self- and communally induced pressure to hike big-mileage days. I went back to the trail with a clearer focus, once again planning on using my membership in the thru-hiking community to further my research. When I returned to the trail, I was also given an addition to my trail name reflective of my injury; instead of being known as simply Turtle, I became known as Bad-Ass Turtle.

The struggle to balance my goals as researcher and thru-hiker continued throughout my hike. It was always difficult for me to be forced by my injury to keep an appropriately slow pace. I fretted when people passed me by and when they talked about their plans to hike 20-plus mileage days. I often wanted to hike longer miles than I could comfortably do, in order to feel that I was making better progress toward the goal of Katahdin. And sometimes I did do just that – choosing to hike two back-to-back 20 mile days in Pennsylvania, after which I was so exhausted that I could barely eat supper, much less write fieldnotes and think coherently. I did, however, continually attempt to maintain my focus on both hiking and research, which meant that I saw myself both as part of the community of thru-hikers and as separate from it, as is evident from this comment made when Streisand interviewed me:

Yeah, it’s funny. Because I mean I see myself as a thru-hiker, definitely. I have a trail name and I’m hiking every day. You know, I have the huge appetite and all that stuff like most thru-hikers. But in some ways I don’t see myself as part of THE GROUP. And also as a researcher, I think I spend a lot of time sort of sitting back and observing and not really being a mover and shaker. Like, I’m not the one who organizes a group of people to slackpack. But um, I don’t know, I see
myself as part of the group, cause I’m a thru-hiker. But also I see myself as sort of being different, because I have this secondary or really primary purpose for my thru-hike that really no one else I’ve met has. (July, 2001)

The tension between my two goals can be seen in my hesitation over my “secondary or really primary purpose.”

When I reached New England, I found it necessary to take some time off the trail for the sake of my mental and physical well-being. Because of the extreme heat in New England during the summer, the scarcity of water, and the emotional impact of being away from family and loved ones for such a long time, I took one week off in August, spending it with a friend in Connecticut, and another two weeks in September to spend with my parents traveling through Maine. Of course, taking this much time off from hiking and doing research meant that I was separated from my thru-hiker community and that I would have to skip even more miles before meeting my fiancée for the last two weeks of our hike and the summit of Katahdin. Skipping these additional miles led to an intensification of the feeling of separation from the community of thru-hikers. At a hostel in Monson, some weekend hikers asked me if I was a thru-hiker, and I began giving a wishy-washy answer about having been a thru-hiker in the past, but taking some time off, and not being sure if I could currently call myself a thru-hiker. In the middle of this exchange, which occurred over the breakfast table, Buffalo, a fellow thru-hiker and research participant, leaned over and whispered to me “You’re a thru-hiker.”

On October 2nd, my thru-hike ended with a summit of Mt. Katahdin, the northernmost point on the Appalachian Trail. Even this summit, which in many ways was a joyous occasion for me, was clouded by my uncertainties about my membership in the thru-hiker community, based on my failure to complete the entire trail. I believe that this uncertainty can be traced to a division within the community itself, over issues of how to define a complete thru-hike.

Making Connections between Research and Teaching

One of the biggest dilemmas I have faced since embarking on this research endeavor, including writing and defending my dissertation, interviewing for jobs, and now writing using my dissertation data, is making connections between my research – which is based entirely on non-school based learning – and possibilities for teachers and classrooms. I have often felt that my research has implications for theory about literacy – especially having to do with providing data to underscore a theoretical construct that previously had little actual research to back it up. I wonder, however, how generalizable my research is to classrooms. In the future, I would like to extend these findings into educational settings. I would like to examine the multiliteracies that students practice both in and out of classrooms. These may be uses of and proficiencies in literacies that are not valued in schools and may reflect styles of learning, knowledge areas, and skills that are necessary for living in the world but that are not addressed by traditional schooling. For example, young people may excel in reading maps, reading their own bodies, reading landscapes, reading and creating multimedia texts, etc. I believe that learning more about these forms of literacies may help us to push the boundaries of education in helpful and transformative ways. This research will involve observing classroom interactions and activities
outside of school to document these literacies. In addition, I plan to interview teachers, students, and parents concerning their experiences with both traditional literacies and multiliteracies.

I would also like to begin to examine what happens when students write in multiple genres; using, for example, Romano’s (1995, 2000) conception of a multigenre research paper. I believe that encouraging students to use multiple forms of writing and incorporating the use of technology as part of that push has the potential to engage students, to help them to recognize multiple perspectives, to shed new light on a very stale format (the research paper) and to help students learn about writing in different genres. I see this as key to the type of education that the New London Group (2000) calls for in its description of the changing and challenging global world for which we must prepare students.

Rejoining the Academic Community

After completing my dissertation, I applied for several positions in reading education and in English education. I interviewed for three of those positions and was offered two; I took a position in English education at the University of Wyoming, which I think is absolutely a perfect fit for me as both a hiker and a researcher and a teacher. I see the position I have taken as completing a circle in several different ways. For one, I was an English teacher for many years before pursuing advanced degrees in reading education, and now that I am working at preparing and supervising pre-service English teachers, I get a sense in which I am home. In addition, the state of Wyoming holds many attractions for me as a hiker – it has lots of mountains nearby – and opens up a new world of winter sports that I have never been able to participate in living in the south, as I have. In addition, I believe that the field of English or English education is a bit more open to the types of literacies on that my dissertation explores than the field of reading has been. Now obviously, I haven’t done a scientific study of this belief; it is based on the reactions of reviewers to articles and conference proposals based on my dissertation research.

During my data collection period, on several intensely hot days when I wished myself anywhere but outdoors, I thought to myself several times, “Leslie, you could be doing a classroom-based study somewhere indoors, with relative ease. Instead, you’re hiking every day for six months, sleeping outdoors, getting filthy. What were you thinking?” During the time when I was trying to secure a job, I found myself asking similar questions. Why did I choose a topic that seems so closely related to my own interests, so unrelated to the topics occupying the interests of those in government and schools?

The answer that I have found, at this point, is that just as I see literacy — reading, writing, speaking, viewing, and interpreting — as closely related to and dependent on personal, cultural, and ecological ways of being, I see research in the same light. My research is truly mine, in the sense that I created it, I shaped it, I collected and interpreted the data — it comes from who I am — my past experiences with teaching, with the outdoors, with reading and writing, with research. I believe that the research I have done in my dissertation speaks about me, just as I speak about it. And I feel that I am uniquely lucky to have been able to do this research and to have the opportunity to work in a place that values it.
References


Multimodality, Literacies, and Dissertations

A. Jonathan Eakle

Recently, multimodal forms of literacy have received much attention (e.g., Alvermann, 2002; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). We see large publishers, such as the International Reading Association, publish online journals with sections devoted to new literacies research and practice (Reading Online, 2003) and the appearance of dissertation work, such as that of my fellow authors, that chart new directions for multimodal literacy studies. Indeed, the literacy research landscape is changing. All one must do to witness these changes is to observe the multiliteracies practiced by young people as they use various aspects of print, the visual, auditory and feelings (e.g., emoticons) in their digital communications. Vanguard literacy dissertation work is needed to keep pace with these transformations.

Thus, as I “look forward” to my dissertation in reading education I find it both fascinating and important to examine the broadening of literacy (Flood & Lapp, 1995) and the reactions against the distinct preference in our traditional field and our culture toward monomodal written texts. Scholars such as Kress (2000) and Bolter (2001) have argued that studying literacy monomodally is no longer adequate in a world dominated by media, one where the visual, in particular, “breaks out” (Bolter, 2001, p.47). The purpose of this paper is to describe a few elementary aspects of multimodal literacy. After a brief theoretical review, I will discuss one of its branches, social semiotics, and sketch how I have begun to use its framework to collect research data.

Semiotics

Tracing multimodality back to its most elemental components led me to the field of semiotics, the study of signs. As Semali and Fueyo (2001) inform us, “the underlying assumption of the study of new literacies is that signs are the basic building blocks of human communication, which takes place in many forms” (p. 5). These basic building blocks include pictures, language, space (social, physical, and abstract), and written texts. Semiotics is at the root of a number of educational theories, such as Vygotskyian constructivism, which examines responses to “self-generated stimuli, which we call signs” (Vygotsky, 1930/1978, p. 39). Signs are communicative units, so it is not surprising that the study of signs is broad, a tree with an immense canopy that contains many branches.

General semiotics is a field laden with abstraction, a formal treatment of signs with hierarchical structures similar to systems such as syntactic grammar (Chomsky, 1964). For instance, Goguen (1998) formulates conductive algebraic proof structures of doubly reversed signs (images of flags). General semiotics certainly has applications, such as pointing to ambiguities in visual compositions. However, it is a branch of semiotics that tends to be decontextualized from the everyday uses of signs; specifically, it is a static system that does not account for the dynamics observed in learning situations (Kress, 2000). In education, how then can researchers utilize semiotics in studying contextual literacy practices?

A contextualized semiotic would attempt to show how multiple signs are used to construct meaning within social environments using texts (broadly defined to include the visual,
auditory, tactile, and spatial). Further, these texts would not be considered in isolation, but would take into account notions of intertextuality. In education, this work has begun, for example, in museums, where reading objects-as-texts is explored by constructivists, often influenced by Vygotsky (see Leinhardt & Crowley, 2002; Paris, 2002). Nonetheless, this line of research focuses principally upon language use and not upon other semiotic modes. To be sure, “learning talk” (Ashe, 2002) is an apt means for studying certain semiotic “meaning-making” processes while individuals interact around objects alone or in groups. Although crucial to consider, this is a limited notion, for other ways of interacting with texts, such as visual ones, are primary literacies (Sinatra, 1986). Of course, reading most texts (Braille would be an exception) involves a visual component, but still studies in education remain principally bound to linguistic codes. Multimodal semiotics attempts to examine all of the senses: sight, hearing, feeling, smelling, a line of research advanced by the New London Group (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) and in detail by social semioticians (Hodge & Kress, 1986; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001; Lemke, 1995).

Compared to Vygotskian sign theory, in social semiotics there is less emphasis on point-in-time individual stimulus/response learning events; social semiotics acknowledges the broader ideological contents of literacy (Street, 1995). In relation to this stance, central to Hodge and Kress’ (1986) social semiotic are issues of power and solidarity. Further, Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) detail aspects of critical multimodal theory of communication, broadly categorized as: (a) discourse, (b) design, (c) production, and (d) distribution. According to Kress and van Leeuwen, designs are the midpoints between concept and expression, production is design organization that is semiotically distributed, articulated, and interpreted. Like other critical theorists, they focus attention on apparatuses of production and consumption. Design, too, is part of this cycle. Design “takes place in the field of social action, and with the agentive force of individual (even if the individual is socially/historically shaped) interests” (p. 63). Therefore, an arguable difference between typical constructivist approaches and those of the social semioticians is that the latter is as much an explicitly political project as it is a social one.

Several aspects of the semiotic design/production/consumption cycle have been of particular interest to me as I advance toward my dissertation research, especially: (a) the creation of visual texts and (b) Street’s (1995) model of literacy: ‘the when, for whom, for what purposes, and in whose interests’ visual texts are produced and the effects these texts have on their consumers. Before I proceed, it is important to mention one other part of my scholarly interest: what the linguist Saussure described as an arbitrariness of signs, an idea later taken up by the poststructural project of deconstruction. To the poststructuralist, language and all other signs are an interpretation of interpretation and thus meaning is always deferred; “There is thus no phenomenality reducing the sign or the representer so that the thing signified may be allowed to glow finally in the luminosity of its presence” (Derrida, 1967, p. 17). The immense literature concerning the poststructural challenge to the interpretation of signs cannot be adequately summarized here (see for instance, Norris, 2002 for an overview of deconstruction). Nonetheless, social semiotics attempts to deflect the poststructuralist challenge by appealing to pragmatics; a practical way to work with signs is to allot signs degrees of transparency within their contexts of use (Hodge & Kress, 1988). A gross example of this reasoning is that the meaning of a McDonald’s sign, the arches, would be more transparent to most people in the West than would be.
In the next section of this paper, I will sketch some of my work looking through a social semiotic frame. During the summer of 2002, I collected data in four museums in Mexico City. The data sources of this pilot study included in-depth interviews with museum curators, administrators, and conservators, some of whom are Aztec (Mexica) scholars and archeologists. In addition, I concentrated much of my attention upon collecting observational and photographic data (see Edwards, 2001). A guiding question was how visual and spatial texts were appropriated for various ideological purposes. My readings of these texts are situated in the interpretations of the local expert participants that I interviewed as well as from my reading in historical documents. Some of my data are represented in the following section of this paper.

Mestizo Literacies

The history of the Mexica is complex, full of myth, and a subject of controversial scholarship. Some descriptions chart the migration of the Mexica from an island called Aztlan while others suggest the civilization migrated from local mountain caves where, according to myth, the god Huitzilopochtli in the form of a hummingbird summoned the Mexica to congregate their monumental civilization. Regardless of debates over their origins, most historians agree that the culture was established in Central Mexico in the late 12th century and from that formation, a century later was founded what is now known as Mexico City.

In 1521, the Spaniards conquered the region and the empire that had been established there three hundred years earlier was destroyed (Duran, 1964). The record of how the conquest by the Spanish of the Mexica civilization was conducted includes the destruction of the Mexica temples and other artifacts of the culture, as well as the enslavement of the native peoples. Included in this devastation was the orderly destruction of most of the Mexica texts, codices that communicated through pictographs, iconographs, ideographs and phonetic signs (Boone, 2000). Over time, the Spanish invaders mixed with the indigenous populations, including, but not limited to, the Mexica. The result is that the present-day Mexican population is mostly characterized as Mestizo, and can lay claim to both European and indigenous lineage. This sketch is a history that most schoolchildren in Mexico are taught in their school textbooks.

Aside from classroom lessons and other conventional literacy practices, Mexica history is retold in the streets and in homes visually and spatially. This is perhaps most notable in Mexico City’s central square, the Zócalo. There, in the open interior of the National Palace is presented another text depicting the local history, one that is exclusively visual. This text, The History of Mexico mural, was executed by Diego Rivera from 1929-1935, following the Mexican Revolution. Rochfort (1997) informs us that during this time the political dynamics and underlying “ideological discourse...formed the basis for a fresh national and cultural identity for Mexico” (p. 83). The History of Mexico was a key text in this reformulation of identity, the identity of Mestizo, the mixture of the lineages of the two continents, commissioned by political reformists for this purpose. Rivera’s text has three massive pages (walls) with multiple figurations; temporally it can be read from right to left (what I will refer to respectively as pages one, two and three). Spatially it can be read from many positions, in one regard because staircases circle the 2-story text (see http://www.diegorivera.com/murals/mural2.html for a virtual tour of this and other public narratives).
Upon what could be reasonably called the first page of Rivera’s text, is represented the past, where an orderly image of the pre-Hispanic Mexica civilization is painted. At its axis, the center focal point of this page, is located the heart of the mythological god-king Quetzalcoatl and above him a disappearing, inverted sun (axial centrality is a principal component in occidental painting since at least as early as Giotto—it denotes a region upon which the composition revolves). Mirroring this page is the wall of the future (what I call page three), also an ordered narrative. However, on page three along the vertical axis are images of Marx, the worker and rising sun. Marx, occupies a visual position that, according to Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1996) grammar of images, is within a “given/ideal” plane (pp.193-194). Further, by pointing with a visual line of force Marx gestures Mexico to a future “given/ideal” utopia. This is a small, but important component of this complex image, but one that points us to its ideological intent.

Connecting these two image pages, in the middle is a third, more chaotic and violent page representing the conquest, Mexican Revolution, and political reorganization. In the three-page cosmological scheme, the middle page can be read as Mexico’s present, according to Rochfort (1997), a period that has and is fixing the idea of Mestizo into the cultural fabric of Mexico. Central figures on the page are political reformists and a colonial soldier whose sword penetrates a cache of gold coins (want could certainly be read as “capital”) that are in the position held on page one (the page of the past) by Quetzalcoatl’s heart. A smiling pope, another central figure in this narrative and in present-day Mexican culture, gestures a sign, blessing the coins and these historical events.

The visual text of Rivera spills out from the palace and into the city. It is a text of recurrent public discourse, the search for identity. As any text, Rivera’s pages can be interpreted differently and appropriated to serve different purposes, but again, according to social semiotics, some signs are more transparent than others. On the streets of Mexico City, from Rivera’s page three, the utopian revolutionary images of Ché, Castro and Rivera himself reappear on T-Shirts, hanging like mobile galleries from vendor wagons in the Zócalo. During my data collection, at the same time and in the same space, protesters circle the massive square advancing their opposition to a state-sponsored airport proposal that will appropriate land from the indigenous ‘peasants’ in the surrounding countryside; often the land granted to them during the revolution, “all that they have” (see Accion Zapatista Report, 2003). The protesters hold images of the revolutionary figure Zapata and red star banners, salient signs represented in the Rivera murals. Soldiers, like Rivera’s, in dark fatigues with automatic weapons keep the peace; they are the signs of Fox’s government. In the countryside, peasants are killed over the airport dispute, while other signs, billboards, are erected along the Periferico, the main transportation artery of Mexico City, announcing a Hollywood movie that glorifies the life of the Frida Kahlo (Rivera’s wife, see http://fridamovie.com/). To be sure, Rivera’s revolutionary images (page two) remain visible, but are appropriated and circulated for different purposes, sometimes for protest and at others for commercial purposes.

Page one of the Rivera mural is also appropriated for political and individual purposes. For example, the sun and its movement was a central aspect of Mexica civilization and again is a central sign on Rivera’s first page. From reading the sun’s movements and other natural signs, the Mexica developed a calendar that was employed for rituals and for practical matters such as planting and harvesting (see http://www.earthmatrix.com/serie02/cuad02-1.htm). According to
Boone (2000), the Mexica calendar signifies a 260-day ritual cycle in which 20 days are repeated 13 times. Each of the 20 days has a corresponding name and symbol, such as dog, death, and rabbit that are repeated 13 times. The sun calendar and its signs are represented throughout Mexican popular culture today and are employed in contemporary literacy practices.

In the present-day Zócalo, for instance, the calendar is used to perform spatial literacies. The calendar’s ritual iconographic patterns and folklore are enacted in the movements of Mexica dancers, who take on the symbols of the calendar during performances. Boone (2000) described that in Mexica annals, such spatial and temporal movements are related to contemporary Labonotation studies, a standardized system for analyzing and recording human motion, most often used in recording ballet texts (Griesbeck, 1996). A Mexica dancer explains “To the East is white and yellow…The East symbolizes intelligence, the South the will, the West transformation and the North consciousness.” Specific movements and positions have been passed on since pre-Hispanic times both orally and through picture texts and through the histories written by chroniclers.

Mexica dancing, like the visual texts of Rivera, serve varied purposes. Dancers in the Zócalo perform in order to display their heritage, to entertain, and for money. For comparison, at night in other public squares of the city young people meet and study pre-Hispanic teachings (multimodal texts such as the codices) and dance the calendar, to connect with their pasts, the “ancient wisdom,” for free. In addition, pre-Hispanic era dancing has been incorporated lately in political protests and in other ceremonies, most notably during last year’s Papal visit to Mexico, when the Church canonized its first Mexican “Indian” saint (Pope John Paul II, 2002). The public mixture of the indigenous and European traditions, the Mestizo identity, remains as strong as when the Rivera text was planned and executed.

The multimodal literacies of Mexico were central to pre-Hispanic rituals and practices and have been instrumental in the formation of Mestizo identity. These literacies are evident today, not only in the cabinets and halls of the historical museums and in schools in Mexico, but also are living literacies that recur on the walls and in the streets of the city. Dissertation study of these multimodalities may serve education by nudging literacy practices away from its preference toward strictly linguistic forms of communication. Further, it can provide information, “funds of knowledge” (Gonzalez & Moll, 1995) that could be helpful to U. S. educators as they encounter classrooms with increasing numbers of students emigrating from Mexico. As our field advances in further multimodal research, studying the discourse, design, production, and distribution of these and similar semiotic chains, should prove to be useful in enhancing literacy theory and practice.
References

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Reaction to Writing a Literacy Dissertation

Ira E. Aaron

This session was unique in that a major professor, three of her former doctoral students, and one of her current doctoral candidates “looked back, looked forward” as they discussed parts of the three completed literacy dissertations and the one still in progress. Though the four studies were quite different in nature, they all four involved a less traditional and enlarged definition of literacy. The presentations were interesting and well organized. As the presenters talked, I thought of how useful it would have been to have a presentation like this one when I worked years ago with the doctoral seminar in Reading Education at the University of Georgia. The content would be quite helpful to doctoral candidates and doctoral advisors as well as to others interested in literacy research.

In addition to hearing the presentations, I read materials the speakers sent to me prior to the conference. (A Reactor receiving papers in advance at ARF may also be unique!) I also “looked over” (read selected parts) of the three completed dissertations prior to the conference. I was impressed with the quality of their work and with the clarity of their reporting. Completing a literacy dissertation or a dissertation in any field involves a lot of planning, a lot of time, and a lot of hard work – which was evident in the three completed dissertations.

George’s dissertation was more theoretical in nature; Leslie and Jennifer used a case study approach; Jennifer’s study also dealt with Korean-English biliterate students; Jonathan is gathering historical data. As I read the papers, looked over the dissertations, and heard the oral reports, I thought of the many dozens of dissertations I had directed and the many other reading committees on which I had served. Seventeen years ago when I retired, most of the dissertations were loaded with statistics or were theoretical in nature. Qualitative studies were just beginning to show up in Reading Education dissertations. Three of the four studies were quite different from those with which I had been associated. The variety of the four topics in this session made for interesting reading and listening.

All four studies were obviously in areas of interest and concern to the presenters, which likely means that they will continue to work beyond the dissertation in the same areas. The presenters who have not prepared articles for publication based upon their studies should do so. They have findings which need to be disseminated more widely.

Candidates traveling the long and sometimes twisting road to dissertation completion need all the support they can get. The three acknowledgements and dedications call attention to friends, families, and committee members. I recall a dedication in a dissertation completed a half century ago at a university in which I was a doctoral candidate. It stated: “I wish to express appreciation to my wife and children – without whose help I would have finished some three years sooner.” The presenters were much kinder! Jennifer thanked her family members, including her baby who was not too much of a distraction; Leslie (Turtle, as she was known on the Trail) thanked her fellow travelers on the Appalachian Trail; George thanked the people at Harry Bissets (a local restaurant) and those at the Georgia Bar, two places where he had
socialized part-time. In his speaking notes, Jonathan acknowledged and thanked his companion and interpreter for her help and support.