

Worlds in the Making: The Literacy Project as Potential Space

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At the end of the first week of the Nebraska Literacy Project—a summer course offered at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for K-12 teachers—the director of a similar course at another university visited the classroom and made this observation to teachers:

I've been comparing our two projects, and it appears that our literacy project seems to be, *is* more confrontational than yours. We have people standing up on the table and shouting at each other because they're impassioned. We're more theoretical. Here, I hear a lot of storytelling and conversation, and I see people sharing their writing and really working at it, and the atmosphere is very nice, but it's different, certainly, from what's going on in our project.

I start with this moment because it strikes me as what fiction-writer Eve Shelnett calls a “radical experience” in which the teachers participating in the project and the teachers guiding it were confronted with what we had tacitly assumed to be the “good” of our activities—activities that included sharing writing and joining in conversation, activities that did not lead to standing-on-the-table shouting. It's a moment that made tensely visible our relationship to the larger, ongoing debates about literacy and the dichotomies reproduced in those debates: shouting/sharing, theory/practice, challenge/safety, researcher/teacher.¹ I start with that moment too because participants repeatedly referred to it, speculated about it, and re-envisioned it in conversation, interviews, and journals throughout the five-week project.²

Kay, for example, who teaches elementary special education, wrote about initially feeling inadequate during Roberts' talk, in which he introduced a poem by Rilke, wanting participants to question the usual division between the poetic and the political. In her journal, Kay compared herself to the underprepared about whom Mike Rose speaks in *Lives on the Boundary* (a shared text in the project). She wrote that she kept silent when Roberts asked for class responses because she believed she was alone in not understanding the poem or the theme of “critical literacy” Roberts introduced. After all, she reasoned, six others in the class participated fully in that discussion; they must have had knowledge she did not. In the days that followed, Kay discussed and wrote about Roberts' visit with other project participants—participants like Martha, a high-school teacher,

who wrote to Kay that while she felt annoyed by the “game of ‘Guess what I’m thinking’” Roberts played, she was troubled too because “I know I do that sometimes, if not quite a bit, with my own students.” Returning to her journal, in an entry she chose to read to the class, Kay wrote:

I wonder how we as a group would be toward [Roberts] if he came back again. Would we verbalize our feelings more, as a group, instead of each one feeling inadequate or unknowledgeable about the poem and Roberts’ questions?

In her journal and in discussions, Kay used that radical moment of Roberts’ visit to look again at the systems that keep teachers divided, their classroom doors closed—each fearing that, especially in a political climate clamoring for “teacher accountability,” she’ll be called ignorant if she speaks; each knowing that in a university the knowledge she has isn’t usually counted as knowledge at all. With Kay’s questions about how that formerly silent group would respond now and with Martha’s recognition of her own game-playing with students, these teachers also participate in the understanding of literacy that David Bleich works with in *The Double Perspective*: “a development of one’s implication in the life of others” and the discovery and exercise of “*our mutual responsibilities*” (67).

Through writings, discussions, and revisions like this, Kay, Martha, and other participants in the literacy project offer me a way of seeing the writing and storytelling that went on as something other than merely “nice.” They offer me a way of reconsidering those oppositions between sharing and shouting, practice and theory, a way of considering how critical literacy is fostered through the creation of “potential spaces.” A potential space—a concept I take from child psychologist D. W. Winnicott and feminist revisions of his work—is one in which participants are able to consider and examine their external realities from a one-step distance. It’s an intermediate arena that, neither immersed in nor divorced from contentious social debates, encourages questioning, experimentation, negotiation, and play. In potential spaces, Winnicott stressed, individuals don’t learn to adapt to a culture, its practices, beliefs, and demands; nor do they experience complete freedom, the discovery of who they really are outside of institutions. Instead, in potential spaces individuals come together as Kay and Martha did to explore, examine, and imagine ways of intervening in, speaking back to, and shaping their institutions.

Bonnie Sunstein’s recent *Composing a Culture*, a rich ethnographic study of a summer writing project at the University of New Hampshire, underscores for me the necessity of investigating the role of potential spaces in developing critical literacy and working for change in classrooms and in schools. In that project, Sunstein writes, participants came together to create a “liminal” or “temporary” culture, one in which storytelling played an important function. Through shared stories, Sunstein writes, teachers were able to “disrupt their own views of schooling” and develop “the personal principles” they would put into place in their own classrooms (232, 242). “Each time someone renders a draft and shares it, each time someone interprets a reading,” Sunstein writes, “a literate re-

invention takes place in the group and the process of personal and professional revision continues. Teachers learn responses and develop language to enable the others' continuing verbal creation" (242). According to Sunstein, however, this literate re-invention and the development of a language for talking about literacy remains undiscussed and unexamined within projects like the one she describes. "No one noticed," she writes, "that the stories were a necessary feature in the revision of a literate teaching self. And certainly no one noticed their stories fusing into a larger story about curriculum and literacy education" (232). As a result, teachers leave such a project feeling, perhaps, "more deeply and reflectively" themselves but also feeling more deeply "the oppression of the school day," the vast differences between the culture of the project and the culture of their schools (233, 232). Through such a project, then, the dichotomies of shouting and sharing, theory and practice, individual desires and institutional demands aren't questioned but reinforced. These teachers may "revise themselves as writers, readers, and as teachers," but they do not, according to Sunstein's analysis, discover that they can also, and probably must also, work for revision beyond themselves and beyond single classrooms (233).

In the literacy project I'll examine in this essay, participants and project leaders were also creating a kind of liminal culture in which our activities were never examined nor discussed—that is, until Roberts' visit. With Roberts' visit and the work of Kay, Martha, and others to make sense of that sudden, strange experience of conflict, teachers made, I believe, an important move from enjoying a temporary culture to creating potential spaces for examining moments of challenge, for articulating the revisionary potential of their own and each other's stories, for recognizing too that their stories were indeed fusing into a larger story about literacy education. More, recognizing that this larger story couldn't be kept out of their school hallways, staff rooms, and department meetings, they made an important move toward considering the potential spaces they must continue to create after the project's end. In this essay I want to examine these intermediate arenas participants created and planned, and I'll argue that it's through such potential spaces that teachers form the voices of critique and possibility they need to address both their classrooms and their institutions.

From Macro to Micro: Developing Literacy in Potential Spaces

In sharp contrast to ethnographic studies of literate cultures like Sunstein's, current discussions about literacy often take the form of taxonomies which categorize and define different orientations toward and agendas for reading, writing, and teaching practices. C. H. Knoblauch in "Literacy and the Politics of Education," for instance, distinguishes between a "liberal" or "personal-growth" conception of literacy and "critical" or "radical" literacy. According to Knoblauch, a teacher with a personal-growth understanding is often an advocate of open classrooms, whole-language learning, and personalized reading programs. He or she speaks "compassionately on behalf of the disadvantaged," while at the same time avoiding "the suggestion of any fundamental

restructuring of institutions” (78). The personal-growth argument, Knoblauch writes, gives teachers the satisfaction of having effected some change in students’ lives while leaving unchallenged the larger systems governing social relations and economic power. Critical literacy, on the other hand, actively seeks to challenge institutional structures and work for a society-wide redistribution of power through joining literacy development to the development of critical consciousness. Through programs of critical literacy like those of Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux, participants come to see how language has been used to dominate, suppress, and pacify them, and they learn to claim language as a means to gain entry into “the arena in which power is contested” (79).

While I find taxonomies like Knoblauch’s genuinely useful—providing a macropolitical view of classroom practices and beliefs, telling me why I’m disturbed by Sunstein’s emphasis on teachers’ personal development divorced from the questions of institutional change, telling me too that I need to take a hard look at my own “rhetoric of moral sincerity” (78)—I also find them to be curiously a-contextual. In order to demonstrate literacy as multiple, situated practices, studies such as Knoblauch’s run counter to the work of Sunstein, Shirley Brice Heath, Denny Taylor, and others. In their neatness, taxonomies suggest that, whatever the time or place, we each occupy one or another category exclusively, all of our beliefs and practices cohering to a single definition without conflict or contradiction. If privileged as the sole authoritative statement that can be made about literacy, taxonomies also lead to a sweeping dismissal of teachers’ daily work and theoretical contributions; they can result, for instance, in the devaluing of whole-language curricula and personalized reading programs as *only* and *always* individualistic in practice, as uncomplicated by the differing contexts and positions of teachers and students. Such a macropolitical view can also plant us firmly in despair, Knoblauch seeing here little hope for enacting critical literacy:

[A]lthough critical literacy is trendy in some academic circles, those who commend it also draw their wages from the capitalist economy it is designed to challenge. Whether its advocates will take [Jonathan] Kozol’s risks in bringing so volatile a practice into community schools is open to doubt. Whether something important would change if they did take the risks is also doubtful. (79)

Skepticism about critical literacy as the latest fashion is needed to insure that it keeps its political edge and is not neutralized by liberal ideology. But when skepticism slips into pessimism, the tone of our work *also* neutralizes the concept of critical literacy: shutting down all discussion; closing off avenues for further investigation, intervention, and action; discouraging risk-taking and revision at the local level.

Recently, Knoblauch and Lil Brannon have answered this pessimism with the final chapter of *Critical Teaching and the Idea of Literacy*, which, stressing the crucial role that teacher-initiated classroom inquiry must play in any reconstitution of education, puts context and teachers back into the picture. Yet because

they are primarily focused in this study on providing, again, a taxonomic view, along with examining and critiquing the belletristic elements of composition's "process" movement, Knoblauch and Brannon don't delve into the reading, writing, and revision *processes* that enable teachers to investigate, intervene in, and change their daily realities.

If we're to answer this tendency to separate theory and practice and if we're to think further, as Knoblauch and Brannon ask, about the place of teachers' inquiries and stories in making and remaking ideas of literacy, we need to turn to those theorists who can move us from the macropolitical to the micro, from theorizing critical literacy broadly to looking for its hints, suggestions, and contradictions in specific contexts. Teresa de Lauretis, for instance, asks us to seek out what she calls the "space-off"—"social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions" where we can witness "the micropolitical practices of daily life and daily resistances that afford both agency and sources of power" (25). Julia Kristeva considers the uses of metaphoric "exile" as a way out of the "mire of common sense" and as a means to become a "stranger" to one's usual practices and beliefs ("Dissident" 298). Mikhail Bakhtin examines the use of "familiar" and "popular" genres of writing as a kind of exile within which to scrutinize, experiment with, and dismantle social rules and doctrine (see "Epic and Novel" 21-23). And Joy Ritchie, in an essay about political divisions between secondary schools and universities, writes of the need for teachers from both institutions to "stake out a place on the margins of the trenches and the ivory towers" from which they can "question established assumptions, envision alternative structures, and work to create new forms of belonging and becoming" (120).

Despite differences in their historical positions and theoretical agendas, all of these writers focus on very much politicized self- and society-transforming processes of revision, the kind that critical pedagogy is especially concerned with. Significantly, these theorists also situate the possibility of revision within particular locations one step removed from the political fray: in the space-off, exile, carnivalized genres, margins, all providing me with metaphors through which to read the work of teachers in the literacy project and in their schools. All suggest, as Adrienne Rich writes, that for scrutiny of self and society to take place, for resistance and revision to be fostered

a certain freedom of the mind is needed—freedom to press on, to enter the currents of your thought like a glider pilot . . . to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment. You have to be free to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate. . . . (43)

Rich, de Lauretis, and Ritchie don't suggest that it's desirable to escape entirely from institutional structures or from arenas where an individual's words are continually contested—a suggestion that teachers in the literacy project, long used to being evaluated according to their students' success on standardized tests or being handed the latest in "teacher-proof" curriculum, would have little patience with. These theorists do, however, stress "a certain freedom of the

mind” as a necessary—and, in critical pedagogy, often overlooked—ingredient for revision. I hear them invoking places and processes that allow a critical and creative one-step distance from, rather than immersion in, conflict and struggle—an intermediate and active arena that Winnicott and feminist revisionists of his work call a *potential space*.

Winnicott, a practicing psychotherapist, was particularly interested in child development and how children negotiate with “external reality” through constructing potential spaces. A child’s blanket, for example, might be a potential space for such negotiation through a toy, which Winnicott calls a “transitional object.” The transitional object isn’t at all neutral; it’s saturated with culturally shared meanings and uses. But pulled into the potential space of the blanket—a small bordered arena that offers the child both a view of the world around him or her and a space apart from that world—it becomes available for examination, play, and transformation, all structured and guided by the child. This learning-how-to-play, to use objects symbolically and to alter their meanings expands, Winnicott stresses, far beyond the space of the blanket and the early childhood years into what he calls “creative living”: into lifelong play with and revision of individual beliefs and cultural forms (100-01).

In other words, unlike traditional psychoanalysis, which focuses entirely on psychosomatic processes, undifferentiated Oedipal narratives and so on, to the exclusion of environmental factors and cultural differences, Winnicott’s practice focused on the interplay between “inner” and “outer,” “me” and “not-me,” prior experience, current context, and imagined future. Winnicott’s theories differ radically, too, from the tenets of American ego psychology, which stresses the adaptation of individuals to external structures, and the normative educational practices that have arisen from its tenets: the construction of school playgrounds as “supervisable spaces” in which the child learns sanctioned forms of play under the “non-coercive moral observation of the teacher” (Hunter 47; see also Gore for a critique of the use of students’ journals as a “supervisable space”); the construction of teacher-training programs in which teachers are presented and make a fit with a pre-formed classroom model (Bishop; Welch). Adaptation and compliance, Winnicott emphasized, brings a sense of “futility” and of “the world and its details being recognized . . . only as something to be fitted in with” (65). Instead, Winnicott stressed play as a “basic form of living” through which individuals, in relationships of trust and dependability, discover their potential to participate in the *reconstruction* of shared reality, rather than merely comply, adapt, fit in (50).³

Because inherent in Winnicott’s work are possibilities for creativity and transformation, for negotiation between individual desires and shared realities, feminist theorists such as Jane Flax have turned to and politicized his work as a means to examine what takes place in potential spaces of adulthood—feminist consciousness-raising groups, for instance. Winnicott’s work is particularly attractive to feminist theorists, Flax writes, because unlike psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan who views the gap between self and other as unbridgeable

and castrating for women and men alike, Winnicott renames that gap as a space of activity and possibility, one without which no self and no culture, let alone cultural transformations, would be possible (Flax 126-27). More, with that renaming, Winnicott posits the existence of real and enabling relationships rather than viewing all relationships as more or less fictional projections of the narcissistic self or as entirely socially determined and imposed from without by the existing power apparatus. This renaming, Flax writes, enables us to see how women (or here we might say teachers) “*can* creatively transform what is given” rather than view “Woman” (or “Teacher”) as the uncontested product of technologies of gender (or of the educational system), as a “castrated, lacking ‘empty set’” on which social meanings are inscribed (119, 117).⁴ This renaming enables us to see, in short, how within the space of possibility between the “me” and “not me” cultural practices and institutions can be examined, questioned, challenged, and changed.

A potential space, Elizabeth Wright claims, can be one of resistance, a place from which “to challenge the parents’ language” (99), to interrogate and dissent from received and naturalized meanings. A potential space is also one that, in the interstices of institutions, in daily micropolitical practice, allows one to “participate *with some equality* in the fun of meaning” and the “zest of experimentation” (Wright 99; emphasis added). Through such experimentation, participants in a potential space can imagine themselves out of positions of pessimism and paralysis and create from “tradition out there,” as Winnicott writes, new forms for participating in social arenas. For such revisions to take place, however, with contributions from all participants, each working with some equality, words like “love,” “trust,” and “friendship” have to be taken seriously. Love, writes bell hooks, drawing on the work of Paulo Freire, is “a mediating force that can sustain us” in our work together to identify and change individual actions and shared systems of domination “so that we are not broken in this process, so that we do not despair” (26). Likewise, Winnicott stressed the need for relationships of trust and dependability, so that the participants in a potential space can work through the anxiety that necessarily comes with undoing as well as creating practices and beliefs (see 102-03). In a potential space, the construction and working through of relationships—the development and exercise, as Bleich says, of mutual responsibility—is serious and necessary work.

Especially with their valuing of relational work—considered an “oxymoron” in Western culture, Jane Flax notes, with relationship-building viewed as natural, womanly, not really “work” at all (87)—I find Winnicott and feminist revisions of his practice particularly responsive to the workings of the literacy project. In writings, discussions, and interviews, participants stressed words like “friendship,” “support,” and “trust” as central to their experience of the project, to their learning about literacy, and to the possibility of their sustaining and enriching this learning in the coming school year. It’s that recognition of the need for ongoing relational work, the creation of intermediate arenas between challenge and response, that’s missing from the writing project Sunstein de-

scribes. Teachers return to institutions that, Sunstein observes, aren't going to change and to colleagues who aren't going to understand, and they feel quietly "subversive" as they pretend to do what their schools expect while secretly doing something else behind closed classroom doors (231, 235). That idea of relational work is absent too from our taxonomic, decontextualized discussions of literacy—which don't imagine teachers, their schools, their students and colleagues at all and likewise construct institutions as impersonal and impervious monoliths. Relational work, however, is precisely what participants named as at the heart of their learning in the literacy project—learning through relationships how their individual stories join, disrupt, change, and are changed by the words of others, learning within potential spaces how to rename their relationships to institutions from one of compliance or alienation to one of collective, responsible, and creative participation.

The Literacy Project as Potential Space(s)

The five-week literacy project met for four half-days a week on the University of Nebraska campus and was collaboratively designed and guided by four teachers—a tenured professor in the English department, an assistant English professor whose doctorate is in Curriculum and Instruction, a junior-high language-arts teacher, and me, then a first-year doctoral student. The project's sixteen participants, fourteen women and two men, taught grades kindergarten through 12 in both city and rural school districts across the state. While half of the participants were English or language-arts teachers, the elementary teachers taught all subject areas, one in special-education. Another participant taught high-school German, and still another was an elementary-school principal.

Most of the teachers had participated before in the state writing project and said they signed up for the literacy project to "extend" or "refresh" their learning from that previous class, to find the "support" they'd experienced in the writing project and missed on a day-to-day basis in their schools, or—as in Martha's case—to figure out why the activities modeled in the writing project had not worked out in their classrooms. Martha, who had just finished her third year of teaching at a Catholic high school, said she'd had a "wonderful experience" in the writing project the previous summer and felt keenly frustrated that she'd been unable to create that same experience in her classrooms, her students only "cooperating" with the reading and writing workshop she tried to implement, viewing it as a "game" she directed. She described confusion too over how to make the writing project model work in her Advanced English class, which she'd taught in the past as preparation for students to take the standardized advanced-placement exam for college credit. By the end of the year, she said, "My beliefs were starting to crumble, and I was going back to the traditional way of teaching—the lecture, memorization, have a test over it."

In an early interview, Martha identified two problems that contributed to her classes becoming "just a jumble." First, she'd tried to copy the writing project activities "without seeing the whole picture and without maybe totally under-

standing why I was doing them.” At the same time she was trying to copy those new activities, she’d also worried that dropping “traditional” instruction would leave her students unprepared for the next teacher, and so she attempted without success to combine a workshop format with her earlier practices—a required list of “classics,” for instance, and a unit on New Critical analysis of poetry. “I wasn’t sure how to mesh it all together,” she said, “so that they’ll get the stuff that everyone else expects them to read and so that I would still not have a major conflict with how *I* feel they should be learning.”

For Martha, then, *both* the workshop format of the writing project and the traditional curriculum that her school encouraged were entirely a part of “external reality,” outside of her experience, her understanding, and, especially, her control. Both pressed her, she felt, to assimilate to sets of assumptions she couldn’t name and examine, and both pressed her to incorporate into her classroom pre-made sets of practices in direct conflict with each other. The literacy project, Martha hoped, would provide at least two intermediate arenas between her previous year’s experience and the next: a place where she could talk with other teachers to see how they negotiate between institutionally-imposed curricula and their own conceptions of what students need to learn; a place where she could use writing to try to “figure out exactly” what she believed and identify “steps” she could take to support those theories in her classroom. In other words, Martha viewed the literacy project not so much as a place where she could become more deeply and reflectively herself, away from school-year questions and pressures, but as a place where she could both figure out what she believed *and* intervene in the gap between those beliefs and the practices of her school.

Jeri, an elementary-school principal, also came to the literacy project looking for steps she could take—not only to develop her own theories about literacy but also to encourage the teachers in her building to reexamine theirs.⁵ Like Martha, Jeri expressed frustration about her failed attempts to put some of her beliefs to work in her school and to foster community and collaboration among its teachers—trying to create, for example, teacher-teams that would meet on a regular basis to discuss their classrooms, learn from each other, and initiate curricular change from those discussions. Like Martha’s students, Jeri said, teachers in her building saw the team idea as a game she set up and that they must go along with: “They say, ‘It’s Jeri’s new idea for this year, so we’ll have to live with it. She’ll discard it after she knows it isn’t going to work.’” The team idea, Jeri said, was to be a way for teachers to intervene and work for change in an entrenched and hierarchical educational system that has stripped classroom teachers of voice and authority. “Until there’s a revolution,” Jeri said, “that says, ‘We’re the experts in education, we are going to regain that political edge,’ we can’t make a difference for kids.” But Jeri recognized too that, far from seeing revolution, teachers saw her innovations as a further step toward denying them voice, yet another mandate imposed from above. In the literacy project, Jeri said, she hoped to observe a “literate” and “cooperative” environment while explor-

ing what she could do to “nurture” such an environment in her school—and while considering too what she may be doing to “block” experimentation and action among its teachers. Jeri viewed the project, then, not only as a place to experience a range of literate practices and reflect on how those practices might become a part of her school; she also viewed the project as a place to consider why that gap between her and her teachers hadn’t yet been changed to one of mutual, zestful activity.

Teachers in the literacy project like Martha and Jeri were very much aware of the pitfalls of courses which, like the graduate teacher-education class that Wendy Bishop observes in her ethnographic study *Something Old, Something New*, present participants with “ideal classrooms” they can export back to their own institutions. The presentation of ideal classrooms in the literacy project, Martha knew, wouldn’t equip her to examine how those practices shape and are shaped by her particular context and to negotiate with others working within her conservative institution. Her own presentation of ideals, Jeri had learned, led only to acquiescence and the appearance of cooperation among teachers in her building. In addition, any presentation of one ideal classroom in the literacy project would have positioned the teacher-guides to suppress, rather than highlight, the different agendas, strengths, and institutional realities we knew informed each other’s classroom teaching.

So instead of promoting one model classroom, the literacy project was designed to provide structures of participation through which teachers could explore together their own literacies and those of their students. Through writing and reflecting alone and with others, we believed, participants could denaturalize and de-mystify their practices, beliefs, and institutional contexts, making them available for examination, critical questioning, and creative play. In Appendix A and B, I’ve sketched a description of some of those structures of participation and the outline of one class meeting, but here I want to stress that those structures (like those Sunstein describes in her study) didn’t remain static, defined once and for all by the syllabus, the teachers entering into and using those structures in any predictable way. Into this arena teachers introduced stories from their schools and from their own educations, their questions and goals, their areas of expertise and their frustrations. They used the structures of participation to form different relationships to their prior experiences, to each other, and to their futures, those relationships far more numerous and complex than anything I could get down completely in my field notes. For example:

Early in the course, Martha identifies Sue, who teaches in a one-room rural school, as someone “farther along” in enacting change in her classroom, and she begins exchanging weekly journals with her.

Martha also seeks out in class Meg, a high-school creative writing teacher, as someone who can teach her how to make time for the daily writing she needs to keep her next year’s class from becoming a “jumble” of confused events and reactions. Sue and a junior-high teacher, Steve, also exchange journals, both sharing histories of cultural censorship and silence, both examining their ambivalent, conflictual relationships to reading and writing.

Among other writings, Jeri examines side by side two essays—one that she wrote as a sixteen-year-old, just before her mother's death, about the primary and positive role her mother played in her life; the second, an essay she is composing now to her 11-year-old daughter, considering the many people who will shape her life and considering too for the first time that she has longed for but should not insist on holding the "number-one spot" in her daughter's life.

In her journal and in group discussions of her "parallel essays," Jeri extends this revision from her family relationships into her school, saying, "I feel very strongly that we *all* share in the responsibility of every kid that's in the building," but adding she recognizes too that she "hasn't quite accepted" not being at the center of responsibility and control—in both her daughter's life and among teachers in her school.

Jeri also joins up in class with Pam, who teaches in a Catholic elementary school, to learn how Pam has set up her whole-language classroom, how other teachers have responded to her revisions, and how she works to communicate her theories to other teachers and to her building administrators.

Kay writes a case study of a third-grader in her special-education classroom who struggled physically and painfully with speech, becoming frustrated, angry, and unwilling to try, until he formed a friendship with a deaf student and through that friendship, learned to converse in American Sign Language.

In response to Kay's reading from her case study, Martha writes in her journal, "This tells me again that literacy really is social, like Janet said in her town meeting." In her journal, Jeri wonders what she can do in her building to make the writing and examining of such stories from the classroom possible; she writes that she needs to "recognize" and be "sensitive toward" the differences in each teacher, as Kay demonstrates with this student, resisting her tendency to "put everything in *my* realm of experience" and "quickly make judgments."

In Martha's small group, Peggy brings in drafts and revisions of a teaching philosophy to guide her next year's seventh-grade classroom, and Martha, considering with another teacher on the drive home from class "who we were and who we are becoming," writes a poem, "Stripping," in which she imagines herself moving from "Hiding behind my lectern in my two-piece gray suit of Armor" to walking, stripped of armor and lecture notes, among her students, "anticipating being caressed or cut."

In these ways and others, participants created in the literacy project numerous potential spaces for entering together into the "fun"—and the terror—of remaking their theories and their classrooms. Initially surprising to me, they also created potential spaces for learning from—rather than dismissing as irrelevant, as "not-me"—the many differences in their daily realities as teachers and in their culturally-shaped literacy histories.

For instance, during the first week of class, participants tended to talk and write about their students and about literacy in the sweeping strokes of what Knoblauch might call a personal-growth conception of literacy. Reading is a "good" and "positive" activity, and students are "apathetic" and show a "lack of effort" when they do not enter enthusiastically into classroom reading, wanting only to "escape" through reading "trash," if they read at all. Or society is to blame for "deadening children's curiosity" with TV, or else the nationwide

educational establishment is at fault for insisting on measuring students' learning and teachers' success through standardized test scores. Such discussions always started in a fury, then quickly stalled with participants frustrated and silenced by this beyond-their-control external reality that opposed the values they believed they all shared.

In response to this trend in class discussion, Sue introduced in her "town meeting" (see Appendix A) at the end of the first week a very different relationship to literacy. Reading from a draft of her literate life history, she described this scene in which her father sat in a rocker, reading aloud from the Bible, while she, a child, sat on the floor and listened:

I somehow got my bare foot underneath the rocker of my father's chair. I was sitting on the floor, and as he sat back, my foot was in the wrong place. The rocker came back and landed across my toes. My fear of my father was such that I didn't say anything, just let the weight of the chair rest painfully on my foot. I don't know how long I sat that way, but eventually he moved again, and I was free. The pain hasn't gone away, though. This memory came back as I was looking for memories of being read to as a child. I can't remember that sensation of closeness and safety that other people [in class] have described.

Relating this experience to class discussions of *Lives on the Boundary* and *Ways with Words*, Sue said that in her family and surrounding culture, reading outside of the Bible was "idleness" and storytelling was—as it was for the Roadville residents that Heath describes—boastful, selfish, and dangerously close to lying. Sue concluded by suggesting that the idea of escapist reading should not be dismissed; her own secretive reading-for-escape throughout childhood and adulthood had given her—like the familiar and popular genres Bakhtin explores—various ways for defining herself differently from the reality in which she lived.

Though there was nothing overtly confrontational in Sue's town meeting, it worked in the classroom as a powerful form of challenge and a model for dissenting from received and naturalized meanings. Her words, along with Heath and Rose, urged Martha to consider in her journal that what she had called "apathy" might be students' perception of school as "isolating" them from their families' values or as "seemingly meaningless" in the larger contexts of their lives. For Martha, a potential space for questioning and revision was created through the tension between her view of the uncontested, undisturbed good of reading and Sue's disquieting story. In this space Martha could consider the "not-me" of Sue's story and at the same time allow Sue's reading to tug at her own reading of her students. In that potential space created through the intersection of her world and Sue's, Martha *noticed* Sue's story as disrupting her beliefs about reading, *noticed* this story joining a larger story about literacy, *noticed* that something was happening in the here and now that could alter the stories she would tell about students in the future.

Sue's town meeting also led Martha to look again at her own literate life history and re-examine her statements, "I have always enjoyed reading" and "I

have always had a joy and passion for reading.” In her draft of that history she began to explore the contexts of her reading: the competitive atmosphere of her high school where “The only purpose of writing and reading . . . was to get good grades”; the university where she embraced a strict division between books that held “universal truths” and books that were “low” and “trash.” She considered how during college, she “shoved into the closet” the popular romance novels she used to share with her sister, who had married as a teenager and, now divorced, was raising three children on ADC benefits. Remembering that the readings she and her sister once shared, Martha began to revise her belief in the rightness of high/low culture divisions, and in a project newsletter article she examined connections between “the welfare trap” and the “literacy trap,” one dominant group in society “controlling literacy for their own agendas” and “subtly manipulating” people like her sister to “keep them in their place at the bottom of the economic and literacy scale.” In her journal and in contributions to the project newsletter, she wondered what *Wuthering Heights* might have in common with a Harlequin romance or the impulse to spray graffiti on a bridge with that to write a tragic play.

Martha began, in other words, to consider what the “not-me” of Sue’s story might indeed tell her about her own literate life history, her family, and her classrooms. And she began to revise through an act of reflection that wasn’t quiet and solitary but populated with many competing, creative voices: the voices of Rose, Heath, Sue, her students, her sister, her college professors, her own as she’s talked to and about students in the past, her own as she might talk to and about students in the future. More, moving from the journal to the project newsletter, she made this story of revision public and urged others to imagine how they might rethink familiar cultural categories.

But at the same time that Martha and the other participants used the potential spaces they created to re-examine their literacy histories and beliefs, they also looked ahead to the coming year—a looking ahead that, as in Martha’s poem, created both a sense of play and disturbance. As Martha imagined transformations in her next year’s class—turning her school’s required reading of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Animal Farm*, for instance, into sites for her and her students to consider “stories of oppression and power”—she also wrote, “All of this sounds good in theory sitting in this class during the summer with people who enjoy writing, but how do I handle this when I return to school in the fall?” and “I’m not exactly sure how I’m going to do that yet, and that’s very scary.” Participants like Martha who had left the experience of the writing project enlivened and enthusiastic, only to see their ideas “crumble” during the school year increasingly voiced the concern that this history was about to repeat itself.⁶ As Winnicott underscores, playing and negotiating need a place, a time, and an ongoing sense of encouragement and support. Especially given their experiences following the writing project, participants in the literacy project knew that the creation of a place, of time, and of encouragement would not just naturally happen.

The Literacy Project as Continuing Project

One response to this concern was provided by Jeri who planned and led a literacy event that asked participants to list some of their beliefs about literacy, explore one in further detail, and then list and describe steps they knew they could take in one classroom to enact that belief. She then asked participants to describe the “literate culture” of their building or their department and list steps they could take to intervene in that culture. Finally, she asked participants to list activities and relationships from the project that were important to them and to form one goal for continuing that relationship or activity in some way.

In essence, Jeri was asking participants to reconsider their construction of “external reality” and move from the macro to the micropolitical, from being paralyzed by something “given” in their classrooms and in their schools to making goals to step in, play with, and maybe even transform some part of that reality. Goals participants formed ranged from continuing a journal partnership started in the project to planning—and implementing that fall—a new Curriculum and Instruction seminar, called “Classroom-Based Research,” that would support teachers in researching and writing about their classrooms.⁷ Martha considered that while it seemed an overwhelming task to learn about the varied literacies of 130 students or more, she could begin by asking them to compose and discuss scenes from their literate life histories, as she and others had done in the project. Two teachers discussed bringing into their teachers’ lounges some form of “book talks” to change the nature of conversation there. Others formed the goal of proposing to their school administrators teacher-planned and teacher-guided in-service workshops. I made the goal of starting a journal-partnership with my officemate and initiating a lunchtime teaching discussion circle for graduate teaching assistants in my department.

With these goals, participants imagined potential spaces they could create beyond the boundaries of the literacy project—spaces not just of individual reflection but of cooperative activity, intermediate arenas they could form within the busy and often overwhelming social arenas of their schools. They recognized that their activities and discussions were not finished; through the literacy project their beliefs and lives were not neatly and completely transformed. As Jeri noted, “I can’t say this experience is over and done with, my paper turned in, and now onto the next experience.” Instead, teachers made plans to extend this course, and among the potential spaces they imagined were those that would support not only individual changes in particular classrooms but also collective challenges to institutional structures.

For instance, during Jeri’s literacy event, Martha wrote that it seemed “a shame” to have three high schools in her area and yet no contact among the schools’ teachers. Two days later, she met for lunch with three teachers, one from her school and the others from the two nearby public high schools. The purpose of the lunch, she wrote in a project newsletter article, was to “get to know each other better,” “pool our resources,” and, especially, plan for responses to the

upcoming visit to their district by a conservative educational reformer. About that lunchtime meeting, she continued:

We share the same distrust and doubt about his message and quick fix-it solutions to our nation's education. Linda is going to obtain his tape, and we are going to invite all teachers from our departments and others who would be interested to view this tape . . . Our purpose here is to gain support to question his methods and solutions when he visits September 30. All of our administrators seem to be jumping on a bandwagon behind this man, and it frightens us that they are falling for his propaganda without examining his talks. Together, we can protect our right to literacy from top-down mandated "reform." We are tired of being talked at, and we intend to do some talking.

For Martha, who said during an earlier class meeting that she was reluctant to call herself an "authority" on anything, this writing marks a dramatic revision, and it's a revision not so much in her stance toward this reformer and his conservative "back-to-basics" movement in her school (such would have been her response from the project's start), as in her stance toward "external reality." At the project's start, Martha had spoken of her beliefs, her classroom practices, and her uncertainties as all pitted against a formidable, untouchable reality of recalcitrant students, indifferent colleagues, department-imposed curricula, a powerful test industry—an unbridgeable and disempowering gap between "me" and "not-me." But in the passage above, Martha's words suggest a fundamental change in her construction of and relationship to those external realities. She imagines relationships through which she can claim authority to talk back—not acquiesce, not shut her classroom door either—to building and district policy-makers. With that lunchtime meeting, she starts transforming the gap she's identified between her beliefs and what's happening in her school into a space of collective activity and possibility. More, she locates the possibility of transformation in particular literate practices: in discussion among a group of concerned teachers, in the "reading" of videotapes, in the writing of this account, in forums that encourage and support talking back.

Worlds in the Making

The literacy project did not offer teachers a set of beliefs and matching classroom practices, and their experiences in the course, as far as I can see in my notes and interviews, did not produce a move from one position to another on a scale of literacies. Class transcripts throughout the five weeks show a lot of slippage and tension among conceptions of literacy as participants and teacher-guides alike spoke, even within the same sentence, of reading as "survival," as "accepting other points of view," and "as maybe not just accepting other viewpoints but realizing that you really do have something to learn." If the goal for the entire course was to resolve this tension among functional, liberal, and critical conceptions of literacy and settle, once and for all, into a firm commitment to the latter, that goal wasn't met.

But in fact, the work of teachers in the literacy project can teach us, I believe, to change the way we talk about literacy whether in a summer course for K-12 teachers, a seminar for graduate teaching assistants, or an undergraduate classroom. They can teach us to look for literacy development not in the occupation of a particular, stable position or in the claiming of a coherent, codifiable set of beliefs but rather in the imagining and carrying out of projects of revision: incomplete, always creative, and ever-renewing projects that Bakhtin calls a “world-in-the-making” (31), that Winnicott calls “creative living” (101), and that Martha calls, “Learning to look at the How and the Why as well as the What. How will I do this? What will it look like? What are the values I want my students to gain?” These teachers can teach us too that this literacy-development-in-the-making is the lifelong project—beyond a temporary summertime culture—of creating potential spaces in which we continue to join with others to support, challenge, nourish, and play with the questions of “How?” “Why?” and “What will this look like, what will this mean?”

In these intermediate arenas, conflict doesn’t vanish, but our ideas about just what the conflict is *can* change as that gap between individual and institution, “me” and “not-me,” is populated by other individuals, enriched by relationships, and complicated by recognitions that institutions aren’t always “out there” but “in here,” in our language, rituals, and assumptions. Especially with their emphasis on relational-work, such spaces can foster, rather than suppress, the “rhetoric of dissensus” advocated by John Trimbur and others: Sue’s sense of trust and support through project activities and through her reading enabling her to call attention to and dissent from the group’s dismissal of “escapist” reading; Martha’s relationship with Sue enabling her to re-examine and critique what had been her “sacred beliefs” about literacy; Kay’s reading of Mike Rose and her exchange of writing with others following Roberts’ visit showing us all how a voice of difference can be constructed and made audible. In potential spaces, as these teachers demonstrate, we can revise our relationship to conflict from a two-way pull between acquiescence or flight to the opportunity to join in seeing how what is “given” can be examined, questioned, pushed against, changed.

“Meanings change as we think about them,” Ann Berthoff writes, and Sue, Martha, Jeri, Kay, and others in the literacy project can tell us how both individual meanings and shared realities change as we enter into potential spaces that foster zestful, supported questioning and play (71). These teachers can tell us that we need in all classes (not to mention in the whole of our academic lives) to make *time*, make *space*, form *practices*, and form *relationships* for this kind of radical play. And, maybe especially, these teachers can tell us that we need to consider with our students and with each other ways to continue this work beyond the boundaries of five or sixteen weeks—into creative living, into active membership in our cultures, into the lifelong practice of revision.

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Appendix A: Course Description

The syllabus for the literacy project outlined three goals: (1) to use our own histories as readers and writers to explore the contexts in which literate practices take place and the social meanings and values those practices imply; (2) to examine students' needs as developing readers and writers and the family and community literacies they bring with them to school; and (3) to examine the assumptions about literacy on which our teaching practices are based and how those assumptions are situated within a larger educational and cultural context. Shared texts for the course were *Lives on the Boundary*, *Ways with Words*, and *The Right to Literacy*. Optional texts available in the classroom included *Lessons from a Child*, *In the Middle*, *Insult to Intelligence*, *The Violence of Literacy*, and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

The daily activities of the project included:

Literate Life History: In the literate life history, participants focused on one episode in their lives as readers and writers or recreated a range of episodes to help them consider their literate development, its relationship to their familial and cultural contexts, and the place of writing and reading in shaping their lives.

Literacy Case Study: In the case study, participants interviewed another person—student, family member, or friend—and examined that conversation with the goals of gaining insight into the complexities of literacy in another's life and becoming better observers of students in their own classes.

Reading and Observation Journal: The journal was defined as a forum for participants to respond to their readings and to class activities, as well as observe, record, and examine language use and literate practices in and outside of the classroom. In addition to the teacher-guides, participants gave their journals to one other person in class each week for reading and response.

Literacy Events: Literacy events, collaboratively planned and conducted by two project participants each day, asked the class to engage in a reading and/or writing activity and examine the activity's implicit assumptions and agendas.

Small Groups: During every session participants met in small groups to read drafts of their writing—literate life histories, case studies, journal observations, letters, position papers, poems.

Literacy Storehouse and Book Talks: Each class began with a participant reading from a text of his or her choice (for instance, *Writing without Teachers*, *Backlash*, *Ceremony*) and ended with one or two participants giving a review of a book they were currently reading.

Town Meetings: Town meetings provided forums for participants to speak for several minutes on an issue in literacy that they wanted the class to consider and discuss.

Newsletter: Each week participants put together excerpts from journals, case studies, writings generated during the literacy events, letters, and book reviews in a newsletter for the class.

Appendix B: Sample Class Outline

First Hour

Literary Storehouse: Louise (reading poem by Gwendolyn Brooks and excerpt from Adrienne Rich's "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision")

Literacy Event and Discussion: Kay and Peggy ("Stepping Stones," a journal activity designed to help participants identify, examine, and compare life-shaping events)

Second Hour

Small Group Meetings

Third Hour

Literacy Event and Discussion: Donna (visitor to the project and professor in the English department and Women's Studies, leading reading and collaborative writing activity in examining roles of race, class, and sexual orientation in writing and reading; discussion of suppressions of those roles in classrooms, consequences, and means for resistance)

Town Meeting: Martha (a critique of the assumptions underlying the "Hooked-on-Phonics" approach to reading)

Book Talk: Nancy (on Peter Elbow's *What Is English?*)

Lunch: Linda's house

Notes

¹ For an in-depth examination of those dichotomies and their history, see Joy Ritchie's essay "Between the Trenches and the Ivory Towers."

² In this project, I followed ethnographic and case-study models for research, participating in and keeping field notes on all class activities, collecting writings from project participants, and conducting interviews with three participants twice during the five weeks, as well as meeting with two the following year. The purpose for this research was two-fold. First, since the literacy project was a new and experimental course, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Composition Program wanted a thick description and multiple perspectives of the course to learn how participants described their experiences and to see what revisions in a future project should be made. Second, we wanted to model through my position and activities in the project one way in which a teacher could be a researcher in his/her classroom. I've fictionalized the names of participants in and visitors to the project throughout this essay.

³ This form of play to examine, question, and alter is very different from the passive notion of play prevalent in Western culture and used to reinforce, rather than reexamine, the status quo—as when a male co-worker, accused of workplace sexual harassment, responds by saying, "I was only *playing* around." That is *not* the kind of play Winnicott calls a "basic form of living," and that is not the idea of play I want to promote here or in my classrooms.

⁴ This renaming can also help those of us in composition studies revise the resistance/assimilation dichotomy that, as Peter Mortensen and Gesa Kirsch have explored, has structured discussions about academic literacy and authority. It can open up a space between arguing for uncritical repudiation of academic conventions or arguing for equally uncritical acquiescence.

⁵ Jeri's presence in the literacy project, I think, prevented all of us from constructing our school administrations as the kind of monolithic and oppressive force that Sunstein describes in *Composing a Culture*. As project teachers worked to create relationships with Jeri, they had

to question and complicate their representations of their own schools' administrators. As Jeri described wanting to encourage change in her school but meeting with quiet resistance from teachers, project participants had to reconsider their own forms of resistance. Teachers talked, for instance, about how they and their colleagues would sit, arms folded, in the back rows of in-service workshops they'd had no part in planning—and how they had never joined together to propose their own teacher-led in-service workshop. In this way and in others, Jeri helped point us toward renaming the wide gap between teachers and administrators as a space in which speech and negotiation might be possible, needed, collectively, to at least be tried.

⁶ Martha's narrative of heady enthusiasm and dramatic change through participation in the summer writing project, quickly followed by the "crumbling" of her new beliefs and practices, creating the increasing sense that she must now choose between being a teacher or having a life, tells me that we need to revisit the goals and activities of both writing and literacy projects. In "Lives on the Outside," Lil Brannon considers the self-sacrificing image of the female teacher who (as in Nanci Atwell's *In the Middle*) "writes to all 150 students almost daily, keeps daily detailed records on all students' work, holds daily conferences individually with every child, always smiling, always there for her students" (461). Such an ideal image, Brannon writes, insures that "no teacher can in fact be gifted or energetic or self-sacrificing enough" (461). Such an ideal image may also be what the National Writing Project and other teacher-education programs promote—setting up teachers like Martha for failure unless they are also introduced to the means for scrutinizing and revising such cultural constructions of the teacher.

⁷ That course, which enrolled nearly thirty teachers, including those who had been unable to participate in the summer literacy project, was repeated, at the teachers' urging, the following spring semester as well and has continued informally in monthly potluck meetings.

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Special Issue: TETYC

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