

DIGITAL CHILDREN'S LITERATURE ANTHOLOGIES: ENGAGING NEW LITERACIES WITH TEACHER CANDIDATES IN AN INTRODUCTORY COURSE

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Abstract

Literacy teacher education has become increasingly complex given the rapid pace of technological advances and the fluidity of what counts as literacy today. In addition to having to learn how to teach traditional print literacies, teacher candidates need to develop understandings of digital and critical literacies so they can prepare their students to negotiate life, citizenship, and work in our globally networked societies. How can we prepare teacher candidates to confidently negotiate their roles as literacy educators in this ever-shifting context? This paper reports on my approach, as a literacies professor, to the initiation of new teachers into the rich, but overwhelming, field of literacies education. In an introductory literacies course, upper-elementary-level student teachers complete a single major literacies assignment -- the curation of a digital literature anthology, intended for use during practicum. The assignment requires new teachers to integrate multiple interconnected strands of literacies theory and practice. Through the lens of New Literacies Theory, student teachers engage numerous relevant areas of literacies teaching and learning. Their own learning process involves working in-between quality children's literature, social justice themes, student needs and interests, curriculum expectations, print-based literacies, and multimodal texts. The challenging experience of curating the various components of a digital literature anthology when they are in their first semester of the Teacher Education Program, allows teacher candidates to gain a quick appreciation for the nature of literacies today. They recognize the need to adopt professional dispositions open to change and complexity. Through my description of this work with new teachers, I hope to open up critical conversations on the complexities of literacies teacher education in our times.

Keywords: *New literacies, children's literature, teacher education, language arts.*

1. Introduction

Given rapid technological developments and ever-expanding understandings of what constitutes literacy in the digital era (Cope & Kalantzis, 2003; Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Dwyer, 2016; Fei, Weimin, Nguyen, 2022; Turner, Eisenstock, Hicks, Jolls, O'Byrne, Paciga, Price-Dennis, Schira Hagerman, 2025; Vasquez, Janks, Comber, 2019; Watt, 2019; 2023), literacy teacher educators grapple with how best to prepare teacher candidates for the elementary classroom. In addition to learning how to teach traditional print-based reading and writing, beginning teachers need to keep in mind that each time a new technology is introduced, new literacies are required (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, Castek, Henry, 2018). This is an ongoing challenge, as educators are responsible for ensuring students develop the literacies needed to thrive in their everyday lives as students, as citizens in a democratic society, and in their future careers. Adapting to a rapidly shifting field can be especially overwhelming for professors and new teachers trying to situate their practice within this literacies ecosystem. How can we prepare elementary level teacher candidates to feel confident in their roles as literacy educators in this ever-shifting context of proliferating literacies? In this paper, I discuss how I respond to this challenge in the context of an introductory literacies course in elementary-level Teacher Education.

2. Teaching & learning context

I am a literacies professor in the Faculty of Education, at a large Canadian University. The Junior level (Grades 4 to 6) *Language Arts* course described in this paper is offered during the first semester of a two-year Teacher Education Program, in the province of Ontario. This is the only *Language Arts* course students take at the Junior level. They also take an introductory literacies course at the Intermediate level

(Grades 7 and 8). The Junior level *Language Arts* course discussed here takes place 3 hours per week, over a 12-week period. The Ontario Language Curriculum (2023) consists of 4 strands. These include:

Strand A: Literacy Connections & Applications – The focus on connections and applications, permits students to transfer skills and draw on knowledge from the other strands, from other subject areas, and from wider contexts

Strand B: Foundations of Language

Strand C: Comprehension: Understanding and Responding to Texts

Strand D: Composition: Expressing Ideas and Creating Texts

Our program offers an optional technologies course, but no course in Children’s Literature. Given the limited literacies course offerings, it is important students receive a comprehensive introduction to literacies teaching and learning in their Junior level *Language Arts* course.

3. The issues

In addition to limited literacies course offerings in our program and a new Language Curriculum (2023) with a strong focus on *The Science of Reading* (Duke & Cartwright, 2021), the field of literacies education has become increasingly complex with the advance of new technologies. Students need a solid grounding in both traditional print-based, and digital literacies teaching and learning, in spite of time and program constraints. My past research inquires into the out-of-school video making and sharing practices of three female, Somali Canadian YouTubers, and it is important to bring such new literacies into the classroom (Watt, Abdulqadir, Siyad, Hujaleh, 2018; Watt, 2019, 2023). Knowing that teacher attitudes impact what and how they teach, how do we help new teachers appreciate the complex nature of literacies today?

4. New literacies theory

Proponents of new and multiliteracies studies regard literacy as a collection of emerging practices for communicating in diverse and multiple social and cultural contexts (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; New London Group, 1996). With regards to the issue of how to assist new teachers grasp the complex array of literacies relevant for education today, New Literacies Theory (Leu et al., 2013, 2018) provides a helpful framing. It has been proposed as an umbrella term that brings together diverse areas of research, theory, and practice within the ever-expanding field of literacies education. Alongside traditional print text, New Literacies Theory and pedagogies embrace different modes of meaning making (i.e., multimodal)—including visual, audio, spatial, and gestural (Kress, 2010). This broadened notion of literacy accounts for the expanded role digital technologies play in everyday life, including increased contact with difference both online and face-to-face. Multiliteracies pedagogies in teacher education has always been based on principles of social justice and equity, and critical literacies are also an important component of New Literacies theory and practice.

To promote a love of reading with their own students, teacher candidates are asked to reflect on what literacies are *for* (Willinsky, 2001). Literacies should be viewed not only as activities students *do* at school. Being literate informs and enriches our lives, whether we are reading the meanings others produce, or are communicating our own meanings. These key ideas ground candidates in the relevance of the literacies work they do with students. For similar reasons, literacies programs should be constructed around quality children’s texts, which can be used to engage literacies development, cross-curricular content, and social justice themes.

5. The assignment

Students take my introductory Language Arts course in their first semester in the program. With so much new content, it is a challenging period in the program. When I assign the digital literature anthology, most question their ability to pull so many elements together at such an early stage in their learning. Most understand literacies within the traditional confines of print-based literacy, and one of my main goals is to expand this assumption. I purposely want the literature anthology assignment to feel like “too much” to force students to grapple with the complexity of our field. Six weeks later, when students share their anthologies with classmates, their sense of accomplishment, pride, and enthusiasm attest to the relevance and power of this assignment. After doing this for more than a decade, with 90 students each fall, this is always the highlight of the semester for everyone.

Students know one of the main goals of this assignment is to have them design learning experiences that bring together a number of components of the Ontario Language Curriculum (2023), including many kinds of literacies. By applying curriculum expectations to this meaningful teaching and

learning context, they gain hands-on experience applying curriculum and theory to practice within the meaningful context of children's literature.

The literature anthology is to be designed as an educator resource which includes 3 titles that are related around a social justice theme. Students may choose a theme they already feel strongly about teaching, or they may select a topic they want to learn more about. For example, collections written by Indigenous authors are often chosen by students who may not have been exposed to these perspectives in their own schooling. These collections are meant to be used during their first teaching practicum. Students must introduce the collection and explain how the titles are examples of quality children's literature, appropriate and relevant for students at the junior level. For each title students provide a summary, keywords, explicit links to the theme, brief suggestions for use in the classroom, and curriculum connections. They need to make links to all 4 strands of the Language Curriculum (2023) in the collection, including activities that engage reading, writing, word knowledge, listening, speaking, media/visual literacy, media production, and The Arts Curriculum (2009), which includes Drama, Fine Arts, Dance, and Music. To accomplish these goals, teacher candidates learn how to integrate curriculum expectations to create holistic and meaningful literacies learning opportunities for their students.

These literature anthologies are published as digital flyers, which are posted on our class website. Teacher candidates thus learn the importance of collaboration through sharing their work with colleagues. The ability to share with an authentic audience underlines the value of digital authorship and multiplies the number of children's literature titles and ideas for teaching each student in the course has access to for their own learning and growth. Even students without much knowledge of children's literature leave the course with a solid sense of what is available. With 40 students in each class, and 3 titles per anthology, teacher candidates have ready access to 120 titles and suggested peer-created activities. Each anthology is an exemplar of literacies curriculum design. Through sharing their work, they have multiple examples of how curriculum, theory, pedagogy, and quality children's literature can be used in the classroom to engage New Literacies learning and social justice themes.

6. Engaging the messiness of literacies teaching & learning

Teacher candidates find the task of designing a digital literature anthology challenging, but ultimately the project is enjoyable, practical, and rewarding. Sharing work with the professor and sharing it with classmates are completely different experiences, that impact content and design decisions. Publishing the collection as a digital flyer provides experience designing a digital text. Students experience the power of multimodal meaning making. They see how images, external links, video, sound recordings, as well as font, colour, and headings support meanings in the written text. Having peers as an authentic audience for their work also highlights how digital publishing can deepen engagement and learning, while improving student writing. The need for correct spelling and editing skills becomes apparent. Creating an anthology your peers might want to use in their own classroom, is also highly motivating. They also experience the uncertainty that comes with sharing their work publicly, another important lesson for educators.

Traditional print-based literacy pedagogies are taken up in the suggested activities that accompany each title. Students are required to include the full range of literacy skills in the activities, including reading, writing, vocabulary learning, speaking, listening, and digital literacy. They are also encouraged to include multimodal activities such as video making, podcasting, or art making. The open-ended nature of this assignment inspires teacher candidate creativity. As they involve themselves in the multifaceted work of putting together their literature anthology -- that includes the higher purpose of bringing social justice themes to elementary students -- they take ownership of their work and gain confidence as literacy educators. Themes engaged by teacher candidates through their chosen texts include anti-racisms, immigrant experiences, poverty, war, LGBTQ+ identities, eco-justice, disabilities, neurodivergent learners, gender, and Indigenous perspectives, to name a few. Immersed in the messiness of teaching and learning New Literacies through quality children's literature, teachers candidates gain a quick appreciation of the enormous potential of literacies today, with all they have to offer.

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