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Situating Adolescent Literacy Research in Adolescents' Stories

by Kathleen A. Hinchman

*Even the silence
Has a story to tell you.
Just listen. Listen.*
(Woodson, 2014)

In this stanza from *Brown Girl Dreaming*, Jacqueline Woodson directs her pre-adolescent writing self—and us, her readers—to listen to stories around

us. Stories connected to adolescents' literacies are important for literacy educators because they help us situate instructional research in relevant, productive ways.

Youth's narratives tell us who they are and provide evidence of their literacies. Kid watchers have long recommended such attention so teachers can learn youth's teachable moments (Goodman, 1985; Moje, 2000). Yet many secondary schools have too many students or too rigid curricula, leaving teachers little time to know students. This article is a reminder to adolescent literacy educators to ground use of research-based teaching methods in knowledge of student stories in order to yield meaningful literacy instruction.

Stories and Identity

Much research has connected older youth's literacies to their identities as members of multiple affinity groups. Marked by the teen years and puberty, adolescents are in the age span just before adulthood. This demographic category was delineated in the last century by psychologists who characterized teens with derogatory images that persist despite efforts to debunk them; in contrast, current scholars note the multi-faceted challenges tied to coming of age (Lesko, 2012).

The research literature is replete with case studies connecting adolescents' literacies to difference, sense of self, consciousness, narrative, and position (Moje & Luke, 2009). This research describes the expertise youth bring to classrooms as readers of romance novels, writers of fan fiction, and

composers of spoken word poetry, Snapchat images, and Vine narratives. Youth reveal their values in these richly varied compositions.

Effective adolescent literacy teachers listen for their students' stories. They greet students at classroom doors, gather admit and exit slips, and design queries of students' perspectives (Fisher & Frey, 2004). They draw on students' stories to shape sensitive and interesting literacy tasks.

Stories and Texts

Adolescent literacy research also suggests that texts used in disciplinary studies are evolving, even as youth invent new literacies for new technologies, weaving culture into the mix (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008). As the latest generation reached adulthood, it helped turn nontraditional texts into critical sources that older adults scramble to access (see, for example, *Hamilton: An American Musical*).

We're producing more texts than ever, production that is transforming workplaces even while it's often ignored in schools. Brandt (2015) explained, "We are now entering an era of deep writing, in which more and more people write for prolonged periods of time from inside deeply interactive networks and in immersive cognitive states" (p. 160). Schools encourage students' reading of complex nonfiction texts, while many young people deftly compose their own, composing that can encourage wide reading and mentor text study. Such youth also demonstrate audience awareness born of social media, comprehending others' compositions via their authoring.

Successful teachers encourage forays into composing and composing-driven reading critique. They help



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students decipher new media conventions and reshape academic composition using these evolving forms.

Stories and Disciplinary Literacies

Research has also begun exploring disciplinary literacies, that is, the skills and strategies used by disciplinary experts for knowledge building (Shanahan, Shanahan, & Misischia, 2011). Such experts use a variety of reading strategies that includes source checking, contextualization, and corroboration across disciplines. Goldman and her Project READI colleagues (2016) refined delineations of discipline-specific literacies by describing core constructs and progressions in three disciplines.

Moje (2007) argued that young people's stories are also important to disciplinary literacy, arguing that culturally responsive disciplinary literacy pedagogy helps all students access power codes associated with disciplinary knowledge. Such pedagogy bridges everyday literacy practices to disciplinary learning, teaches skills for navigating discursive communities, and challenges conventional wisdom to reshape disciplines.

Research on disciplinary literacy provides another compelling reason for educators to draw on adolescents' stories. Stories help teachers design explanations so students can read, critique, and compose varied multimodal texts. They help educators develop intriguing inquiries with literacy tasks that foreshadow the next generation of disciplinary literacies.

Conclusion

Attending to adolescents' stories reveals bits of identities that can, in turn, shape the design of research-based classroom literacy tasks, promote use and production of cutting-edge texts, and address disciplinary literacies. It means listening to such stories intently, responding respectfully, and offering new insights judiciously. This generation of young people has the potential to change the world. To do so they need literacy expertise that

is situated in their stories and sensibilities for the evolving nature of literacies.

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Kathleen A. Hinchman is Professor in the Reading and Language Arts Department and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs in the School of Education at Syracuse University. A former middle school teacher, she teaches literacy methods courses and seminars. A co-editor with Kelly Chandler-Olcott of the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, her scholarship includes grants, articles, and books, including *Reconceptualizing the Literacies in Adolescents' Lives* with Donna E. Alvermann, *Best Practices in Adolescent Literacy Instruction* with Heather Sheridan-Thomas, and the *Adolescent Literacies Handbook of Practice-based Research* with Deborah A. Appleman. Her current scholarship explores policy implications of literacy-related secondary school reform and use of formative design to explore methods of adolescent literacy instruction.
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