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# Literacy Lessons Learned

by Various Authors



As we look back on the last three years of our editorship, we cannot help but be in awe of the brilliant scholars and educators that have contributed to each issue. In the pages that follow, you will find a collection of “lessons learned,” in which several of our authors describe something important that they have learned in their careers as educators and scholars. Please enjoy this collection!

## More Accessible History Through Literacy

*Kristy A. Brugar*  
*University of Oklahoma*

As a teacher and student of history, I engage in a variety of literacy skills from reading and listening, to viewing historical material with personal interest and with attention to the potential for inclusion in my classroom/work with my students. As an early career teacher in the 1990s, I remember busily typing an excerpt from *Nat Turner’s Confessions* for my eighth-grade U.S. history students to expand on the minimal description of

the events in 1831 and provide them an opportunity to work with primary sources. I was excited to share this document with my students before returning to their textbook, where they were able to better understand the image below and contextualize the events of 1831.

As I reflect over more than 20 years in the classroom, I am appreciative of the ease by which I can now share a new bit of information, curious resource, or interesting point of view through technology from a simple email attachment to students, shared document or drive, Interactive Whiteboard, or Apple TV. Historical materials have become much more easily accessible for students to enter into historical study with various reading abilities. To name a few, The Library of Congress (<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/civwar/>), The National Archives (<https://www.archives.gov/research/military/civil-war>) and the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History (<https://www.gilderlehrman.org/>) have become “go to” resources for many educators.



*Figure 1.* Victor, Orville J. (Orville James), *History of American conspiracies: a record of treason, insurrection, rebellion & c., in the United States of America, from 1760 to 1860.* (published [1863]), New York, N.Y.: J. D. Torrey, [1863]. Retrieved from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture / Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

### **It's Hard Work**

*Catherine Compton-Lilly  
University of South Carolina*

To be a true lesson, what is learned must entail growth, and probably a degree of discomfort. I believe that my lesson has two parts. First, I have learned that our education system has a long way to go before we serve all children and families and help them to realize their goals. Second, I have learned that if we are to succeed, we must listen to families and children. Education is not about finding the right program or being the perfect teacher. It is about respecting students and their families, learning from them, and letting them teach us how to be their teachers. We must know children as readers, writers, and people who bring unique and important ways of being to our classrooms. This means opening our minds to differences and confronting our own assumptions. It's hard work.

### **Literacies and Cariño**

*Christina DeNicolo  
Wayne State University*

Literacies and Cariño: Two words that come to mind when I reflect on what I have learned about literacy, biliteracy and language learning.

We learn the languages and literacies of our homes and communities through engaging with others in everyday moments and experiences. "Literacies" refers to the varied types of knowledge that we acquire, embody, and use to make meaning. The term literacies helps us remember that the written word is not the only form of content we read, and that not all literacies are valued in school. Literacies recognizes the stories, songs, sayings, language practices, and wisdom that is passed on from families, elders, and ancestors and that can serve as a guide for learning.

The work of scholars such as Antrop-Gonzalez, Bartolomé, Prieto and Villenas, and Rolón-Dow, has reinforced what I learned from families and teachers; a critical care perspective requires us to continually work towards an awareness of the nature of power and

schooling. This work supports teachers in seeing the wholeness of their students and developing an understanding of the ways policies and curricula often fail to build on students' home languages, language varieties, and literacies. Cariño also signifies taking action to listen, advocate for, and identify resources that reflect students' language practices, social identities and cultural backgrounds.

### **Caring for and about Children and Families**

*Patricia A. Edwards, Michigan State University  
Kristen L. White, Northern Michigan University  
Lori Bruner, Michigan State University*

The range of adults who care for children and how they support them is diverse. We are honored to share three lessons we have learned about family involvement with readers. First, to show respect for and value of the diversity of family composition we have learned that language matters. Thus, we advocate for replacing the term "parent" with "caretaker" to highlight the importance of those who care for children. Second, we have learned that because families are so uniquely beautiful, a school partnership between the home and family that honors, respects, and values each family cultivates opportunities for differentiated support that is appropriate and productive for the context (Edwards, White, & Bruner, 2019). Finally, we have learned the importance of caring and showing care. Humans and human interactions are complex and multifaceted. We have learned that the human spirit generally craves the security and safety of knowing that others care *for* and *about* them, including the school.

### **The Value of American Sign Language**

*Debbie Golos  
University of Minnesota*

As a former sixth-grade literacy teacher at a School for the Deaf, I saw first-hand how Deaf and Hard of Hearing children from families who had early exposure to American Sign Language most often could read and write on or above grade level, while those without this early exposure were most often significantly delayed. Now, with the increasing awareness of the culminating

and detrimental impacts that language deprivation has on Deaf and Hard of Hearing children's language, literacy and social emotional development, we know that it is critical that these children be exposed to ASL from birth. We need literacy researchers and educators like you to help dispel the myth that learning to sign can harm children's language and literacy development. There is no evidence to support that. In fact all children, Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and hearing can benefit from ASL and bilingual strategies to connect ASL to English print.

**“Señor Calavera” a Trickster’s Tale, Strikes Again!**

*Sandra M. Gonzales*  
*Wayne State University*

Instead of cupcakes for my son's birthday, his second-grade teacher suggested I bring a book and do a classroom reading. Afterwards, the book would be signed and added to the classroom literature collection. As a parent who is also a teacher, I loved this idea! The book I read was from the “Señor Calavera” series, by Yuyi Morales. It's a fun and funny collection that draws on cultural themes, such as the Mexican tradition of *dia de los Muertos*. Several months later, I asked my son if his classmates were reading “Señor Calavera”? He curtly replied, “No mom, everyone thinks that book is weird!” Surprised, I reflected back and realized that I neglected to introduce cultural concepts. Doing so can open-space for diverse life-worlds to be understood and celebrated. Instead, I left my child vulnerable to stigmatization by his peers. I should have known better, but so should his teacher. Parent engagement is important but a culturally and linguistically safe space needs to be established first, otherwise we set-up culturally and linguistically diverse parents and their children to be “othered” or shamed for their cultural displays. A post visit activity and discussion is also critical. Lesson learned!

**The Power of Miscues**

*Yetta Goodman*  
*University of Arizona*

I have been researching literacy teaching and learning for more than a half century. I continue learning about literacy every time I carefully observe readers and

writers predicting—self -correcting or not—as they deem necessary, by examining the complexities of their miscue making. I continue learning as I talk with teachers about their own miscues and explore with them the power of their students' miscues. Learners develop literacy as naturally as they learn to run, talk, and sing. This happens whenever they engage in reading and writing in their search to make sense. By developing knowledge about the concept of “miscue” (a concept pioneered by Kenneth Goodman), teachers learn that miscues reveal the knowledge readers and writers have about their own language(s) as they actively participate in literacy events. When a young reader substitutes “a” for “the” while reading authentic, self-selected material, miscues reveal what he or she knows about grammar and making meaning. The reader is comprehending.

**Literacy as Connection**

*Troy Hicks*  
*Central Michigan University*

From our work with children and teachers, with schools and communities, we know that literacy learning is situated and complex. Depending on the age of the learner, whether we are in school or outside the classroom, the kinds of texts and tools we have available, and the particular moment, the work of literacy learning can be rewarding, frustrating, or both. Yet we also know that the work is, at its core, about those moments; moments of connection, moments of discovery, and moments of understanding. As literacy educators, we live for these moments. My lesson learned in over 20 years of literacy education is that we need to anticipate these moments and—when they come—pause long enough to savor them. Our relationships with people, with texts, and with our own sense of self all remind us to celebrate the ways in which we connect with one another and the wider world.

**Sounding the Alarm**

*Leala Holcomb*  
*University of Tennessee, Knoxville*

Ninety percent of brain development occurs from ages 0 to 5. Having access to language during those years

molds brain structures that last for a lifetime. All hearing children, except for the outstanding cases of abuse and deprivation, can access language and attain healthy brain development that opens doors to kindergarten readiness in tackling literacy. Deaf and Hard of Hearing children, on the other hand, often suffer from language starvation if a signed language is not given during their early years. When a Deaf or Hard of Hearing child does not have sufficient access to language during the short biological window for language acquisition, there is a high likelihood of lifelong cognition, language, and literacy struggles. Although the risk of relying on Deaf and Hard of Hearing's partial hearing as the sole means of accessing language is high and produces variable results, this continues to be the principal advice parents receive from professionals. Hence the reason why the average reading level of Deaf and Hard of Hearing adults remains at 4th grade. Deaf and Hard of Hearing children need sign language in addition to all other language and communication opportunities to mitigate the risks of language starvation. Any mass population of babies experiencing any form of malnourishment due to environmental causes during early years is alarming. It is time to sound the alarms about the epidemic of Deaf and Hard of Hearing babies experiencing language starvation that leads to lifelong cognition, language, and literacy impairments.

**About More than Words:  
What I've Learned about Literacy**

*David E. Kirkland  
New York University*

I've learned that literacy is about more than words. It is about who is recognized and who is not. By flattening literacy in the image of the seen, a narrow version of us gets baked into literacy teaching—a version that is incomplete, favoring an intersection of cis, heteronormative, White, abled, English-speaking, monied, and Judeo-Christian—or put simply, privileged—identities. I've learned the farther away students are from this identity, the less likely they are seen; the less likely literacy classrooms work for them.

There is clear evidence that our failure to see some

students drives educational outcome disparities. The problem is not necessarily what we do not see but what we think we see; thus, the problem is our assumptions. However, to achieve equity in literacy education, we have to move past our assumptions, moving against the logic that our students should learn the way we teach rather than us teaching the way our students learn.

In this light, I have also come to learn that effective literacy education cannot be about broken students, but rather must be about supporting students who are vulnerable to broken systems. For vulnerable people, literacy is about preservation. Then teaching literacy must be about teaching us to preserve—preserve our languages and cultures, to tell history on our terms, to preserve it, too, to preserve ourselves by preserving the congregation of ideas that will make the world better, that will free our bodies and heal our souls.

**Multi-Faceted Motivation of English Learners**

*Selena Protacio  
Western Michigan University*

I pursued graduate studies 15 years ago so that I could study and better understand how to motivate English learners (ELs) to read in English. After all this time, I wish I could say that I had all the answers. I still don't. But I do think that we have a better understanding on this topic. From my research, I have found that social and cultural factors play important roles in motivating ELs to read in English, and these factors are underexamined in the reading motivation literature. Because of the diversity of ELs' experiences and backgrounds, we must consider multiple factors in order to address their motivation; we cannot just rely on the motivation literature and reading motivation assessments which have focused substantially on native-English speaking populations.

**Pedagogy, Policies, and Politics**

*Darin Stockdill  
University of Michigan*

I'm constantly inspired by the teachers I work with, and I'm committed to helping them develop their practice

so that they in turn can empower and engage their students. I have learned, however, that the structures of schooling often get in the way of the practices I promote in my professional development work. Inquiry-driven, disciplinary literacy instruction, for example, takes time, professional support, and opportunities for collaboration with colleagues. Our current education system, especially in Michigan, is under-resourced, and time, support, and collaboration are in short supply. So, I'm pushing myself to think more about systems as I also consider instructional practices. We must continue to research and promote effective pedagogies, but if we don't also build systems that foster and support these pedagogies, we're spinning our wheels. Ultimately, it means we have to get political and push for policies that enable the work we know needs to happen.

**Dr. Christina P. DeNicolo** is an Assistant Professor of Bilingual and Bicultural Education in the Division of Teacher Education at Wayne State University. Her research examines how students' cultural and linguistic knowledge is accessed as a resource for learning in language arts classrooms through instructional methods and pedagogical tools such as children's literature. She can be reached at ar7011@wayne.edu.

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**Dr. Darin Stockdill** has over 25 years of experience as an educator and has been a secondary English and Social Studies teacher, an educational researcher, a teacher educator, and a curriculum developer. As the Instructional and Program Design Coordinator for at the Center for Education Design, Evaluation, and Research (CEDER) at the University of Michigan, Dr. Stockdill manages a range of instructional design projects and collaborates with other educators to design innovative learning experiences and resources. He can be reached at daristoc@umich.edu.

**Dr. Troy Hicks** is a Professor of English and Education at Central Michigan University. He directs both the Chippewa River Writing Project and the Master of Arts in Educational Technology degree program. A former middle school teacher, he collaborates with K–12 colleagues and explores how they implement new literacies in their classrooms. He can be followed on Twitter: @hickstro.

**Leala Holcomb** graduated from California School for the Deaf in Fremont and is a doctoral candidate at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Leala is interested in emancipatory research and bringing teaching practices that are culturally responsive to deaf children in education. She can be reached at lealaholcomb@gmail.com.

**Dr. Patricia A. Edwards**, a member of the Reading Hall of Fame, is a Professor of Language and Literacy in the Department of Teacher Education at Michigan State University. She served as a member of the IRA Board of Directors (1998–2001), as the first African American President of the Literacy Research Association (formerly the National Reading Conference) (2006–2007), and as President of the International Reading Association (2010–2011). Her most recent book *New Ways to Engage Parents* is the winner of the 2017 Delta Kappa Gamma Educators Book Award. She can be reached at edwards6@msu.edu.

**Dr. Kristen L. White** joined the faculty of Northern Michigan University as an Assistant Professor of Education in fall 2018. Interested in how young children are labeled as particular "kinds of readers" and embody imposed reading identities, Dr. White's research interrogates how materials in the form of prescriptive curricula and assessments, policy, and space operationalize young children's literate identity in early childhood classrooms. She can be reached at krwhite@nmu.edu.

**Lori E. Bruner** is a former elementary school teacher, reading specialist, and ESL interventionist. Lori's research focuses on word characteristics in early-grades text that impact young children's fluency development

## Critical Issues - Literacy Lessons Learned

and how these factors can help educators support their students while learning to read. She is currently engaged in doctoral studies in Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education at Michigan State University. She can be reached at [lbruner@msu.edu](mailto:lbruner@msu.edu).

**Dr. Catherine Compton-Lilly** teaches courses in literacy studies and works with professional development schools at the University of South Carolina. She has a passion for helping teachers to support children in learning to read and write. Her interests include examining how time operates as a contextual factor in children's lives as they progress through school and construct their identities as students and readers. Dr. Compton-Lilly is the author/editor of several books and has published widely in educational journals. She can be reached at [comptonlilly@sc.edu](mailto:comptonlilly@sc.edu).

**Dr. Selena Protacio** is an Associate Professor of Literacy Studies at Western Michigan University. A former English teacher in the Philippines, Dr. Protacio is passionate about helping teachers address the reading motivation and literacy engagement of all learners, but specifically English learners. Her other articles on this topic have been published in journals such as *The Reading Teacher*, *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice*, and *Research in Middle Level Education Online*. She can be reached at [selena.protacio@wmich.edu](mailto:selena.protacio@wmich.edu).

**Dr. David E. Kirkland** is the Executive Director of The Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and The Transformation of Schools, and Professor of English and Urban Education at New York University. He has been described as an activist and educator, cultural critic, and author. A leading national scholar and advocate for educational justice, Dr. Kirkland's transdisciplinary scholarship explores a variety of equity related topics: school climate and discipline; school integration and choice; culture and education; vulnerable learners; and intersections among race, gender, and literacy. With many groundbreaking publications to his credit, he has analyzed the cultures, languages, and texts of urban youth, using quantitative, critical literary, ethnographic, and sociolinguistic research methods to answer complex questions at the center of equity and

social justice education. Dr. Kirkland taught middle and high school for several years in Michigan. He's also organized youth empowerment and youth mentoring programs for over a decade in major U.S. cities such as Detroit, Chicago, and New York. He currently leads efforts to enhance education options for vulnerable youth throughout New York City, and beyond. He can be reached at [dk64@nyu.edu](mailto:dk64@nyu.edu).

**Dr. Yetta M. Goodman** is Regents Professor of Education at the University of Arizona. She consults with education departments and speaks at conferences throughout the United States and in many nations of the world regarding issues of language, teaching and learning with implications for language arts curricula. In addition to her research in early literacy, miscue analysis, and in exploring reading and writing processes, she has popularized the term kidwatching encouraging teachers to be professional observers of the language and learning development of their students. She is a major spokesperson for whole language and in her extensive writing shows concern for educational issues and research with a focus on classrooms, students, and teachers. She can be reached at [yettamgoodman@gmail.com](mailto:yettamgoodman@gmail.com).

**Dr. Kristy A. Brugar** is an Associate Professor of Social Studies Education at the University of Oklahoma where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in elementary and secondary social studies education. Her research interests include elementary social studies, interdisciplinary instruction (social studies/history, literacy, and visuals), and teacher development. Prior to working at the university-level, she was a middle school social studies teacher in Maryland and Michigan. She can be reached at [kristy.a.brugar@ou.edu](mailto:kristy.a.brugar@ou.edu).

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