From Sandbox to Altar: What I Didn’t Know, Thought I Knew, and Discovered about Learning and Relationships

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FROM SANDBOX TO ALTAR: WHAT I DIDN’T KNOW, THOUGHT I KNEW, AND DISCOVERED ABOUT LEARNING AND RELATIONSHIPS

by

Cherilyn L. Gardner

A Thesis
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
Socio-Cultural Foundations and Educational Thought

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
August 2007
In this theoretically-based thesis, I metacognitively explore the transactional relationship between critical inquiry and literacy development. Throughout the writing, I reveal my own learning in studying these concepts. Embedded in the discussion of research, readers will engage with my personal reflections, confessions, and applications of what I learned (and am still learning).

Through countless dialogues (academic and otherwise) and my study of literature and self, I found that literacy is much more than what it has been carved out to be by programs promising to raise standardized test scores. Additionally, by breaking the mold, I found that critical inquiry provides significance (which should be education’s focus) to one’s learning, which then determines the durability and capacity of one’s literacy development.

Furthermore, I address the implications for learners in both academic and non-academic venues and how this marriage of literacy and critical inquiry sheds light on how we function as learners in a changing world.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I wish to acknowledge Dr. Lauren Freedman, professor at Western Michigan University, for taking on a self-proclaimed educational revolutionary. Our times of dialogue (academic and otherwise) have proven to be helpful in the development of my understandings.

Also worthy of acknowledgement is Dr. Tracy DeMars, professor at Western Michigan University. She reminded me that not all people think as I do, and she is one of them. All notes of clarification are primarily due to her.

Rounding out the “trio” is Dr. Jill Hermann-Wilmarth. It is with her encouragement that I write a thesis with my own style and not a prescribed one.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge Geri Williams of The Learning Network and my husband, Seth Gardner, who encouraged and participated (willingly and unwillingly) in the application of the understandings noted in this piece of writing.

Cherilyn L. Gardner
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CHAPTER I

ANTICIPATION: A GUIDE FOR READERS

*Getting into the Writer’s Head*

Through discussions with those fortunate to read previous drafts of this document, I have discovered that not everyone thinks, reads, writes, or learns like me. Although I think that people would be best served by how my brain works (please note the thick sarcasm), I must provide some caution, suggestions, and possible rule-breaking for readers.

It is at this point that I must confess that I have never as a writer drawn up a plan, cluster, web, or Venn Diagram before drafting a piece of writing, as many of my past writing instructors had taught me and had learned the writing process to be for themselves. I just start writing, sometimes incoherently, but typically in the middle. Rarely do I ever start at the beginning. I proceed by elaborating on ideas through means of relationships. This is usually followed up with taking a long break. Then, I attempt to organize the ideas and relationships as they make sense to my learning. This process is reflective of my thinking/learning process, which is revealed throughout the thesis. My point in saying all of this is that although it is natural to read beginning to end, that is not how this thesis came about. In fact, the reader might benefit from time dedicated to re-reading and interludes of discussion (oral and written) to develop understandings.

Although I have chapters, headings, and subheadings included in this thesis, it is not my intention for the reader to infer that I have discovered a step-by-step process
for the argued learning theory. I have been given parameters (some which I wish to ignore), and I have in turn provided signposts to guide readers along the way. I do wish readers to make sense of the text, but in a way that is purposeful and constructive for them.

Acknowledgements, Misconceptions, and Notions

In the Text Selection section of Courting and Wooing, I show how I selected and used individual texts and what purposes they served in my learning process. Let me say that the weight of this thesis is in my own discovery and learning, not the individual and collective sums of theories and claims of cited authors. It is for this reason that I do not elaborate on the entirety of particular theories, rather, my intention is to reveal how my own learning has evolved over time from reading the works of various writers. It is out of my passion for learning and discovery that I present this thesis, not out of an attempt to further any one or group of theorists’ own agendas.

If I am to have an “agenda” or purpose for this thesis, it is to show how I, a learner, have developed a working critical literacy over time and am still pursuing this notion even at the close of this document. I am attempting to reveal my thinking and the processes I take to develop understandings for the sake of learning and for the sake of understanding how I learn and how that translates into my personal and professional lives, which, through the process of writing this thesis, I find to be collaborating quite naturally towards a more holistic life of learning. This comes off as one of those “Aha!” moments, which it is, but I’m realizing that what I thought
were two separate lives of learning were always joined together. It just took time of
delving into my learning metacognitively to discover just how connected the
professional and personal are. Maybe this is what “chi” is for me…

Terminology

Throughout the thesis, I will use terms such as inquiry, literacy, and critical (as
a descriptor). I have chosen not to provide a chapter defining terms within the thesis
for fear that the reader might infer that these terms are simple. On the contrary, these
terms are quite complex. For example, I will spend much time in Chapter III undoing
what some define “literacy” to be along with the necessary layering of self-discovery
of what I now understand this term to mean. A concise statement of what I’ve learned
it is not: Literacy is not merely the ability to recognize, pronounce, and spell words
correctly, speedily, and smoothly. It is a person’s developing and transformational
understanding of language and its relevance and usefulness to him or her. Through
reading texts by Cambourne (1988), Smith (1998), and Rosenblatt (1995), I have
discovered that literacy is a personal, yet social, process that grows to be more
complex over time, never reaching an “end”, but always moving forward with
purpose.

“Inquiry”, fortunately and unfortunately, is a hot term thrown around casually
in conversations I’ve had with colleagues over the past four years. The basic notion
or assumption that inquiry is merely following a question is far too simplistic. There
are principles, which I outline in Chapter III, that give inquiry the credibility it needs
to withstand the structures set in place by pacing guides, standardized tests, and
curriculum guidelines. Relying on theories developed by Dewey (1938), Friere (1974), and Vygotsky (1978), I attempt to unfold my understanding of the process of inquiry, which cannot be structured in a calculated step-by-step process. Rather, I show the reader through my own personal discovery that the process is far from linear for me, and I can acknowledge that just like the development of literacy, it is personal yet social. Therefore, the two – literacy and inquiry – are connected, as are the writers I have mentioned… at least as I have read and interpreted them in my own personal and social processes. As I write this very section, I see how I could have rearranged the writers among the notions of literacy and inquiry just based on my understandings of how the two are intimately connected. By the “end” of this thesis, assuming engagement with the reader, I would hope that one would accept the autonomy of learning, modeled through the writing, and develop relationships among these terms and acknowledgements of given writers, in order to better personal understanding of what learning means.

I acknowledge that throwing the descriptor “critical” in the mix of terminology immediately conjures up notions of social justice issues (Freire, 1974). As noted previously, however, I am not raising the banner of every author I cite. Rather, I have fashioned a quilt of sorts to reveal my own learning, not to ignore or disapprove of portions of theories or claims. So, when I use the term “critical” I perceive it as metaphorically raising a mirror, or perhaps a disco ball to be more precise, in order to reflect, acknowledge multiple perspectives, and extend the connected term (whether it be literacy, inquiry, pedagogy, etc.) without assumptions
and overt or covert agendas. When using and living the word “critical” I am intentionally making a choice or challenging what I “know” in order to understand the world in which I live and move. To use this word, I am directly making the choice to not ignore the unknown or what might at that time be deemed as “other”. I am making the choice to wrestle with it and make sense of it in a new and personal and social way.

*Technical Stuff*

I would hate for my readers to infer that teachers, students, or learners (which, by the way, we each can be all three) are predominately one gender. To avoid such assumptions, I will alternate between pronouns. I admit that I have not counted how many times I have used each, because taking time to do so and showing how precise I can be to my reader takes away from the focus of this thesis. Alternating between gendered pronouns is my stylistic choice, which I believe also shows that I intentionally choose not to make unrealistic assumptions about the persons addressed in my thesis. To put it quite simply, it is what it is because I have chosen to write as naturally as possible to reveal who I am as a learner, which involves such stylistic choices as the use of alternating gendered pronouns.

*The Relationship Metaphor*

I have chosen to use “relationship” as a working metaphor for this thesis. Developing a relationship is a process in itself, which is why it works so beautifully to show the process I have gone through (and am still going through) to develop new
understandings. What I have found through my learning process is that it is through relationships that I develop new understandings.

Through this thesis, I show several different relationships. There is a relationship that is built within “literacy” and “inquiry” individually. There is also the relationship that links the two together. Lastly, there is the ongoing relationship that the learner has with these two notions, individually and together, in order to not only understand their purpose, but to understand oneself as a learner and what that means personally and socially.

To explain a metaphor through telling seems far too simplistic for what the essence of “metaphor” is. Therefore, it is through showing that I reveal what I understand of this “relationship” metaphor to be throughout this thesis. I acknowledge that my method of showing my new understandings is atypical for thesis writing. However, I would be in conflict as a writer, thinker, and learner to not reflect my learning process as it naturally proceeds. As I am not a literal thinker, my writing and learning reflects such in accordance. My intention is not to be cryptic in my delivery, rather it is my intention to write as a learner, not a knower. Therefore, I expect that it is the reader’s responsibility to read as a learner, not a receiver of knowledge. I have no answers, only questions which compel me to pursue new understandings of relationships.
CHAPTER II

ATTRACTION: THE WONDER OF WONDERING

During the summer of 2006, I set out on a journey to pursue the possible connection between literacy and inquiry. That journey actually took me to a beach in Aruba with my husband just one year after our wedding. We spent hours by the sea, sipping cold drinks, taking in the beauty of it all, and turning pages of books we had been longing for during the last hectic months of the school year – April, May and June. He buried his nose in 1776 (McCullough, 2006), in an effort to give shade to his already sunburned face and to think of what it means to be a leader. And I found myself embedded in Rosenblatt’s (1995) notion of transaction, periodically watching and studying the metaphor before me: the give and take of the salty waves and white sand. Then, my husband and I would sigh, look at each other, and gush about the words we held in our hands. And we’d wonder. We’d wonder about what those words meant for us at that moment and the moments to come…

As an English educator and graduate student, I was fascinated with the controversy around literacy and what it actually was. Literacy has always been at the forefront of educating children; however, with the initiation of No Child Left Behind, it became a nightmare and noose for educators: All children must be able to read at grade-level by 2014. School districts hustled in a frenzy for the ultimate program that would ensure literacy… and their own survival. Programs like Reading First came to the rescue at a moment’s notice. Armed with a black and white definition of literacy,
step-by-step procedures, and a system that ran like clockwork, all the guesswork disintegrated… along with the students’ spirit for learning (Passman, 2001).

So, how can a program that is perceived as immune to failure hurt students and destroy curiosity? Maybe it is in the definition of literacy itself. Maybe it’s not that easy to figure out. Maybe there are “if’s”, “but’s”, and “so’s” incorporated in the process of literacy development.

I was curious. I was curious as to how a clean cut program like Reading First could turn out to not be a failsafe (Strauss, 2003). I was curious as to why and how my own students developed their literacies in incredibly different ways. I was curious as to what literacy meant for me as an educator, graduate student, and learner in hot pursuit of these questions.

So, I present my story: the implications of metacognitively exploring the transactional relationship between critical inquiry and literacy development. Interwoven are my understandings based on theorists, applications of such notions, imperfections and occasional stumbles, and an artificial ending for the sake of the thesis’s closure.
CHAPTER III

DATING 101: THE CRITICAL AND COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN, WITHIN AND AMONG LITERACY AND INQUIRY

Currently, the view in our society on literacy is that it is primarily made up of two skills: reading and writing. According to the National Reading Panel, reading fluency is defined as “reading out loud with speed, accuracy, and proper expression”, which is a sign that they (readers) are “more likely able to comprehend and remember the material than if they read with difficulty and in an inefficient way” (National Reading Panel, 2006, ¶ 14). If this is true, all one would need to focus on is phonemic awareness. Application of this same mental model to writing would simply suggest that word study (spelling and vocabulary) and lessons in grammar, as tools for success in achieving literacy, would be enough. If the definition of literacy is as simple and concrete as suggested above, one might be inclined to argue in favor of the “skill and drill” method of isolated instruction to ensure more focused learning and retention of skills. It is my argument, through reading (not as defined above) the works of educational theorists, all from different continents of the world, that one’s literacy is not concrete, nor can it be effectively measured by standardized tests as we know them today.

Through reviewing, responding to, and reflecting on literature of various theorists on learning, I intend to show how inquiry is necessary for literacy and its durability throughout one’s learning experience (a.k.a. “life”). First, I will define “literacy” and continue to reveal the elements that need to exist in the learner’s world
in order to ensure one’s durability of literacy. In the second half of this chapter, I will show how inquiry-based learning is the necessary forum in which literacy will thrive. To conclude, I will summarize how the inquiry process allows one’s developing literacy to refine the process of continued learning (inquiry) which furthers the cycle of developing one’s literacy and ensuring its durability.

Defining “Literacy”

As stated by Brian Cambourne (1988), “literacy is a word which describes a whole collection of behaviours, skills, knowledge, processes and attitudes” (p. 3). Literacy is constantly in the active mode, a string of never ending participles concluding merely with an ellipsis. Because the human mind never stops as long as the heart beats, one’s literacy evolves as one experience leads to another. We are constantly taking in information, organizing it, reflecting on it, responding to it, using it, and reworking it. Meanwhile, in this immersion pool of learning, the waters change, exchange, and transact in movement, form, and force. As the barometer changes, so do we as learners change, making choices of desired immersion based on our needs and wants as learners and participants in our society. If we peer deep in the waters of the learning process, we will see what the rudders look like and how they work to propel learning over time.

A confession...As an instructional leader at the school and district levels, when it came to my understanding of a learning-centered environment, I was just a baby paddling in the shallow end of “the waters of the learning process”. In fact, I don’t even know if there was a resemblance of anything remotely connected to a
“rudder”. What I knew was curriculum, grade level content expectations, and universal themes and multicultural texts that were known to engage students. Packaged quite nicely, that was my starting point for the ultimate learning-centered classroom. And then came Bob Fecho (2004).

I thought that I had the whole teaching thing down. My classroom was learning contract-focused, students were making choices about their learning, they were engaged, they were chaotic at times... It was great! But what I realized from reading Fecho’s (2004) understandings of critical inquiry was that the class was still functioning around my agenda, my literacy, my inquiry. What I was doing worked... the students were dutifully engaged, behaved well, and created great pieces of work. The problem was that it was just too safe. Learning was still something that was imposed upon them (as if my learning was stable and concrete), instead of being birthed from within their understanding of the world in which they live. I was addressing the “How?” aspect of inquiry in my class, but not the “Why?” aspect. The boat needed some rocking... in the deep end.

The events that followed this discovery fell perfectly into place for me to explore this infant-stage literacy of the learning-centered classroom. Students had just finished a learning contract and presentations were underway. During this time, I received a flier in the school mail: 6th Annual Poetry Slam, sponsored by the local library and comedy court. Perfect. I thought, “This is it. This is the next learning contract. Something real. Something with a purpose.”
Typically, I would set objectives with ample room for student choice in meeting them. However, this time I decided not to attach any objectives to it. I just made enough copies of the flier for my students. I told them that I had their next learning contract ready for them. They all waited for the announcement. I merely passed out the flier and watched their reactions. To put it quite plainly...they freaked out. The “barometer” of learning was changing for all of us – students and teacher. I could see the questions, fear and awe buzzing about in their eyes. Like a first walk through the Museum of Modern Art, they chattered and pointed and laughed and shivered and...it was beautiful. It was the art of learning in motion.

If we journey further to analyze and reflect on each of the components of Cambourne’s (1988) definition of literacy, we will have a better understanding of the brushstrokes he uses to paint the portrait of the learner. Beginning with literacy as a collection of behaviors, let us look to Frank Smith (1998) and Lev Vygotsky (1978) who suggest that we learn from the company we keep. All behaviors, whether verbal, non-verbal, or gestured, are learned from those around us. We are constantly establishing our identity – who we are. As we observe those around us, we are making meaning within the context of that environment and developing a sense of how we fit in or how we will fit in the society.

Confession/reflection: During the high school-to-college transition, I immersed myself into the driving beat of punk rock music. Not only did I pierce my nose and dye my hair pink, I learned the music and spoke the language. I was punk rock. Then, I immersed myself into the career-focused world of education. I took out
the nose ring, dyed my hair a tasteful shade of auburn, I learned the craft and spoke the language. Through both self-initiated and encouraged exploration I am now the Professional Educator, armed with critical pedagogy – the permission to acknowledge that as “teacher”, I don’t, nor must I, have the “correct” answers. I have learned that life experiences determine how I manipulate my profession. However, I am all the more aware now that these life experiences vary, as must education for all learners, if I am to be a critically reflective professional (Unless, of course, I have a classroom full of me.). Now, not only do I change according to purpose, but I have learned to change the environment to suit my learning needs and sense of self. I’ve learned that this new sense the critical self does not permit self-indulgence, but more importantly promotes self-awareness through relationships. Previously, I seemed to be “fitting in” according to place, time, and preference. Now, I am a traveling learner engaging the unknown with purpose. I am making meaning across time and contexts to develop new understandings in light of the world around and within me.

Looking at behavior-based literacy in a more practical sense, let’s consider a child’s first encounter with reading. While reading aloud to a child, a parent might scroll a finger across the words on the page and point to accompanying pictures. What is the child learning? She is learning how to monitor text, appropriate pacing, the relationship of picture and text, and inflection while reading aloud, to name just a few. All of these behaviors help her construct meaning of what reading is and what she would like it to be. She is developing her literacy even in what might seem a
passive state. Essentially, she is learning what readers do. (Re-reading and reflecting on this paragraph, which I originally drafted months ago, I'm also thinking about the unmentioned learning which is occurring in the relationship between the parent and child. The parent is modeling the value of reading and sharing reading or learning experiences with others. Beyond word recognition is the attitudinal and social relationship with reading in this portrait of a parent and child. So, the questions in my head now: How do modeled learning behaviors at home affect a child's learning in school? And, if they are not “ideal” behaviors, can they be countered or outweighed by the learning behaviors modeled in the classroom?)

“Skills” as an element of literacy is a rather familiar notion for those that encountered the endless worksheets on spelling skills, grammar skills, comprehension skills, “skill-of-the-day” skills, etc. However, when the worksheets are taken away, what skills do learners have for reading a menu, a caution label, a legislative proposal, or writing a proposal of their own? Without learning skills in context, one’s movement in literacy development is not propelled. Reading and writing are not the skills I refer to as one develops her literacy. It is the thinking, the purpose, and the meaning supporting reading and writing that prove to be the skills worth developing. Unfortunately, for those that rely on the skill and drill worksheet method of skill acquisition, that routine of “instruction” will not be of any help to learners. However, a teacher who models “thinking aloud” while reading or writing for a purpose among a group of questioning minds, will prove to be a great deal of help to them as learners making real, purposeful, and meaningful choices.
Traditional methods of instruction that I have experienced as a student and observed as a colleague are about as far away as one can get from real, purposeful and meaningful learning. Because our society has become so technologically-driven and efficiency-oriented, students are treated like the computers we are so dependent upon. “Downloading grammar and vocabulary doesn’t work. The snag, for computers as for children, is that acquiring information about grammar and vocabulary is a nonsensical waste of time unless there is understanding about what is going on” (Smith, 1998, p. 76). Children need to exercise their intelligence. Simply learning about something isn’t good enough. One’s ability to recognize and place colors correctly on a color wheel isn’t good enough. Until the learner purposefully dips her brush in paint, creating an individualized palette and learning experience, will she demonstrate a true depth of understanding. “Exercising intelligence” can only be done through authentic experiences, not merely by receiving information. So, the knowledge needed for literacy is not likened to a hard-drive on a computer. Rather, it is a working knowledge in constant motion, developing new understandings through real experiences. *(I’m amazed by the number of books written about relationships or how to find the perfect mate. No matter the amount of research or surveys done, it is through experiences that one learns about relationships. Real experiences. Difficult experiences. Experiences that challenge already established “knowledge”. However, it is when a person chooses to think and act critically in these experiences that a deeper sense of self and relationship occur within the experiential learning.)*
The experiences that I refer to take the learner through processes or “zones” of development to ensure usefulness and durability of his literacy (Vygotsky, 1978). First, it is imperative to understand that learning experiences are social in nature. Whether in traditional cooperative learning or merely the author’s presence in a book one is reading (the reader taking on the role of “co-author”), there is an undeniable form of collaboration (Rosenblatt, 1995). This collaboration is necessary for a learner to take ownership of new learning. Learning through social means, however, is not limited to dialogue between humans. Rather, the “social” aspect of learning takes shape through the forming of relationships between new learning and old, both relying on connections of some sort – a dialogue of text, not merely text from a page or mouth, but text of the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

It is through this collaboration or relationship building that learning occurs. It could come in the form of discussion, journaling, or the action/reaction of non-linguistics. In fact, it is this last example that can intentionally or unintentionally and collaboratively guide the reading of oral and written texts. For it is through the lens of one’s cultural make up and interaction (or relationship) with others that we read and infer and learn. To ignore the influence of the text of the world, is to ignore assumptions that one has in approaching text. It is at this point, this highly collaborative point, that one dips her toe in the “critical” waters of learning.

Smith (1998) annotates Lev Vygotsky’s (1978) description of collaborative to individual learning through the zone of proximal development as noted in the figure below (Smith, 1998, p. 84).
In Vygotsky’s theory of learning, he suggests that the zone of proximal development is the most integral of the three regions, for it is in the zone of proximal development that new learning can transform to one’s core of understanding of which he has ownership, permitting that he has assistance, socially, with that learning. I use the word “can” because in this state of disequilibria, the social capacity of learning is what will determine the shifting of zonal boundaries. The learner will naturally do his part of questioning because he has moved into a state of wonder. It is then his existing relationships that will assist in the learning, for in his questioning state he is in need of dialogue to make meaning of the new learning. The nature of that dialogue will then proceed to shift boundaries of development for the learner. One must note, however, that the relationship and attitude modeled while within the zone of proximal development are key to one’s learning. *(I chuck as I re-read this introduction of ZPD because I find myself reminiscing about the introduction of “silence” for my husband when we were first dating. He had an emotional connection (anger) to)*
silence that came from his previous experiences with others. My husband is one who needs to process thoughts aloud for understanding. Choosing not to do so is typically in response to a situation in which he feels frustration or anger and wishes to avoid confrontation. Unfortunately for him, I do not process in the same way. I think, and then I speak... or, I just think. So, when we would ride in a car together in silence from my mother’s house, it was not a reflection of my anger towards my husband (as perceived by him), rather a period of time in which I was thinking or enjoying the scenery, but not speaking. It was through several conversations and learning in context that movement through the ZPD of our relationship occurred. More importantly, it was the attitude and behavior modeled in approaching that learning that made the difference.)

Back to my classroom of 7th graders...

A poetry slam. What did the students know about poetry slams? What did I know about poetry slams? Well, there was the poetry slam video we watched alongside reading Bronx Masquerade (Grimes, 2002) at the beginning of the year. So, there was something there to work with. I could have easily taken over at this point and planned out a course of action for student inquiry into the realm of poetry. Instead, I let them pursue the question they were all asking: How in the world are we going to be able to do this? So they made a list... all of the things they would need to work on between then and the actual performance in order to be successful. Bottom line: they wrote my lesson plans and the contract itself. They initiated the process with a laundry list of “first-timer” needs for me: browsing through poetry
collections, writing different forms of poetry, free write poetry, viewing poetry slam competitions, practicing speaking and acting techniques, getting acclimated to a stage and mike. From the list generated in small groups, they then proposed the frequency of approximating the identified skills. Of course, nothing was ever set in stone. At least once each week we “reconvened” to take the temperature as a whole class and as individuals to determine “next steps” for learning. Day to day, week to week, they manipulated the rudders of learning, propelling themselves forward in their own literacies. Through dialogue with their peers and me, Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of learning became so real we could touch it. We became masters of the essence of learning. We laughed, we cried, we argued in the thick of the ZPD. Why? It was the authenticity of the learning experience. We were becoming poetry slammers.

Attitude is integral in developing one’s literacy (Cambourne, 1988). If the learner does not exhibit a positive attitude toward learning, all of the other previously outlined elements of literacy will be difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish. Literacy attitude is something one develops from within, but more significantly, from others’ demonstration of the “art of learning” in the academic forum. It is in the intentional and unintentional modeling of learning that the learner can either thrive or spiral downward into a coma. Literacy attitude from within stems from a sense of purpose, interest, and responsibility for one’s learning. This can be accomplished in a learning-centered environment, in which learners make real choices about learning experiences. Also, as previously stated, a person establishes his or her identity
through the company he keeps. His relatives, friends, peers, and teachers are models for learning. If the learner is persuaded into believing that he cannot learn something or that it is outside his “identity”, then that learning will remain in the outer circle, classified as “can’t be done or understood”. However, if the learner is assisted in seeing himself as a “doer” of the learning, seeing the purpose and usefulness of the learning, and seeing that safety is ensured, the boundaries of the zone of proximal development will shift accordingly for the new learning. The shifting of these boundaries is evidence that the learner is beginning to make sense of the learning by way of organizing the new knowledge.

In late February of 2007, I was feeling a little distant from my students. I was gone several days for training, leaving them with a substitute teacher. I had given them challenge of the poetry slam not even a month ago, and here I was “abandoning” them. Well, at least in my head. I felt like I needed to mend my “circle of influence”, and hold up a mirror to them, showing them what I saw in them as writers and “doers” of learning (Covey, 1989). It was necessary. It was necessary to keep the learning partnership intact. This is the letter I wrote them:

February 27, 2007

Dear ______________________,

I know that this might seem strange (receiving a letter from your teacher), but I feel like I need to tell you some things that have been spinning around in my head the last week or so. I admit that writing this letter to you is partly for my own sanity, but I hope that in being honest and vulnerable with you, you will somehow benefit from it or at least see that I genuinely care about each of you as unique individuals that make up an extraordinary class.
It’s been really rough on me being gone so much last week. In a way, I feel like I might have let you down or made you feel like you’re not as important as whatever I’ve been spending my time doing instead of being in class with you. Believe me, that is not the case at all. Every day that I have been gone I have been sharing your “stories” with those that I’ve been meeting with. I’ve been talking you guys up, especially when it comes to the hard work you’ve been doing for the Poetry Slam. I don’t know if you realize it, but you have come so far.

LeSia, you have proven yourself as a strong writer, yet you display such a humble attitude.
Jayson, you have been pushing yourself to do better, not me, it’s all you.
Bria, one conversation was all it took... and look at the risks you are taking now with your writing.
Tya, you impress me with your self-determination in spite of whatever anyone else might say.
Josh, you always approach things with a positive attitude. You’re determined to have fun, no matter what.
Tamieka, I love that you react to what you read. You display your human spirit in a genuine way.
Eric, you’re starting to look at yourself as a writer differently. I can see that you want to grow, that this stuff matters.
Breanna, your strength is that you are a thinker. When I see that translating into your writing, I’m blown away.
Corey, you’re making choices that take your writing outside the box.
Kasmere, I’m amazed by your honesty and vulnerability shown in your writing. You are an example for me, personally.
Bethany, you might not think that people notice, but I notice that you’re keeping it real and showing what’s important to you.
Whittney, I can tell that you care about what you do, and doing something half-heartedly just doesn’t cut it for you.
Joanie, you realize the importance of stepping up to the challenge, no matter how difficult it may be.
Correna, you have a unique way of thinking and talking about things. You make me think.
Brian, not only are you stepping out of the box, you are tearing it up into shreds.
Ellie, you display such confidence in your writing because you are writing about what truly matters to you.
Rachel, you may seem quiet to most in class, but your writing can speak to a packed auditorium.
Jeremy, you amaze me with your insight in conversations and the writing you produce. How old are you???
Andrew, I think you’re seeing that what you write reveals who you are and what you care about. I appreciate that you want me to give you feedback so often.
Kierra, I’m really beginning to see you write with intensity. You know how to “stir the pot” with your writing and get readers riled up and thinking about your words.

Jayla, I can always count on you to keep it real, no matter what the circumstance.

Sarah, you have blown me away! I am so excited to see what’s next. The word is out!

Mosley, you are clearly pushing yourself to try things you haven’t tried before. You’re not self-conscious when it comes to asking questions. You display steady determination

Joseph, every once in a while, you have a way of surprising me with your writing. I look forward to more surprises.

Taylor, I see you really working hard to make your work unique and truly original. You don’t tolerate something that is mediocre.

Marina, you’re doing a good job of trying out new things and making them work for you. You own it. I see you reacting differently to challenges, and it’s very exciting for me to witness.

I want you to know that I am committed to making this a successful learning experience for all of you. I’m thinking about the Poetry Slam coming up and how all of you have the potential for tearing it up on stage and blowing the audience away. I am so proud of all of you, and you have many more reasons than the ones I’ve already listed to be proud of yourselves. I want to help you make it all happen. If at anytime I’m taking us in the wrong direction at the wrong time, I want to know what needs to change to make this work for you.

I’m hoping that all of this made sense and wasn’t a bunch of “blah, blah, blah”. You have been doing a great job of keeping it real with me, and I wanted to do the same with you. I hope you see this as keeping it real and just being honest because in my opinion, you guys rock and you deserve honesty. I look forward to where you choose to take this class. It’s been a pretty good ride so far, and I only expect it to get better.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Gardner

Out of the letter writing came more letter writing…from the students. They told me of their goals, their newly found beliefs in themselves, their self-criticism, their points of pride, and their secret fears. I realized that from just one letter, my
students recognized that they were learning in a safe environment where they could take risks as individual learners and doers of not only their classroom but their world. They gave me insight to their lives, recognizing their responsibility to me and mine to them. It was a moment of reorganization. I had new information as an educator that I had to make sense of and then act on. My understanding of my student learners and classroom environment changed from “Object” to “Subject” – a newly formed relationship (Vygotsky, 1978).

Organization in Literacy

Learners organize information by means of relationships. These relationships may be formed because of perceived connections between characteristics, time, or contexts, for example. As stated before, a learner’s mind is not like that of a computer. Information is not stored in separate files, placed in alphabetically arranged and artificially named folders, to be retrieved in a linear fashion. The mind is so complex that it can reorganize information from the past from the viewpoint of the present, and it can make decisions in the present from the viewpoint of the future (Vygotsky, 1978). The more literate the individual, the more complex the organizational abilities. It is the learner that is in control of the skills, knowledge, etc., not vice versa. However, if skills are learned in isolation, it is no longer the learner that feels a sense of power, but rather the skills themselves. But, what power do skills have on their own without a living, breathing context? None. Therefore, the mind revolts against the authoritative learning, casting off any chance of its durability. The learner’s attitude may then shift, resulting in frayed processes.
It is this learner that is then identified as “reluctant”. Paulo Freire (1974) notes, “Integration with one’s context, as distinguished from adaptation, is a distinctively human activity.” He continues, “The integrated person is person as Subject. In contrast, the adaptive person is person as object, adaptation representing at most a weak form of self-defense” (p. 4). I interpret Freire’s assertion of “adaptation” as the learner losing his identity in the process of learning, as opposed to “integration” of which the previous letter to my students would serve as an example. I remember around the time that I was in middle school, a metaphor tossed around referring to immigration in the United States was the Melting Pot. It seemed a nice expression at the time… everyone coming together to form a creamy pudding, possibly with swirls, with a new sweetness never experienced before... what was to resemble the American. This was until, of course, citizens (old and new) realized that they could no longer find themselves in the notion of American (Glazer & Moynihan, 1970). Thus, the “salad bowl” metaphor (Adams & Strother-Adams, 2001). Although, with such talk of immigration reform policies and the suggested need for an official language, I see the salad drowning in the dressing, heavy on the vinegar. (So, what are we to use as a model for the preferred integration that Freire speaks of? What is the untainted metaphor?)

In reflection, just as immigrants can lose what they know to be their identities to the process of becoming “American”, so can incoming learners lose themselves to the process of what some teachers (who, in this context, I will intentionally name “knowers”) call being a “student”. In this environment, there is no emphasis on the
student seeing himself within the context of what is being done. Rather, the student is merely done unto, to be followed up by being done… or, well done, in cooking terms.

Considering the drowning of students by means of tightly structured “curriculum”, direct and inferred mandates of teaching-to-the-test, and the coercing of white, middle-class values in schools, is it any wonder that so many of them are labeled as “reluctant”, “insubordinate”, “learning-disabled”, “it’s-not-the-teacher’s-fault”? It is, of course, the students’ responsibility to swim, right? (So, I’m thinking now… What does this say about the teacher-student relationship that this environment promotes? And, what does this mean for the student and teacher’s relationship with the learning process? Is it even possible that learning is valued at this point?)

Learners naturally have a need and a desire to organize information so that it is useful and meaningful for them… so that it makes sense. If they are not allowed to do this or if it is made difficult in anyway, they no longer feel like they have ownership of their learning. The result is that they are stripped from their natural method of learning, to be followed up by their choice to shut down, shut out, and shut up. Bottomline: learners must see themselves in the learning. If not, they are merely a pawn (“Object”), made to adapt to the movement around them (Freire, 1974). (Some questions that have popped into my head at this point: Who determines the value of learning? If it is merely one person and not a partnership initiated by the learner, will the learning be valued? Learning will certainly take place, but will it follow the intentions of the learner or the so-called “knower”?)
As a learning-centered classroom began to take shape, I felt an urge to further my inquiry of this whole notion of the student voice, or even the learner’s voice for that matter. What is the role of learner’s voice in terms of professional development for teachers? What is the role of the learner’s voice in terms of how grades are given? What is the role of the learner’s voice in terms of understanding her spiritual beliefs? What is the role of the learner’s voice in terms of navigating through and reading the “text” of the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987)? What does it mean to be a lifelong learner?

Through dialogue and diverse readings, I desired to organize my understanding of what learning meant in different contexts, what the processes were (if they were different at all), and what power the learner had in it all.

I learned that the power, the catalyst of learning, is in questioning. This is something that I thought I knew way, way back in my head. However, it was in my reading of Rob Bell’s (2005) book *Velvet Elvis* on practical Christian living that I realized the important role questioning plays in learning.

Bell: “A Christian doesn’t avoid the questions; a Christian embraces them. In fact, to truly pursue the living God, we have to see the need for questions” (p. 28).

My reflection: Once the purpose has been established in the learning, in a sense, faith has also been established. The learner has faith that there is more, that this is something worth pursuing. Therefore, questioning becomes priority, even second nature, just for the sake of learning. It is the questioning that justifies the purpose of learning. If there are no questions the purpose is dead.
Bell: “Questions are not scary. What is scary is when people don’t have any” (p. 28).

My reflection: I’ve heard before that the one developing the questions is the one doing the learning. If a student is not questioning, he is in utter submission to whatever “knowledge” the teacher and text are feeding him. He may not even be chewing, but rather swallowing it whole, and risking obesity by consuming nonsensical, unorganized doses of information. As for the teacher, it is irresponsible to not ask questions of one’s practice. That will only lead to stagnate, unresponsive, and unreflective pedagogy.

Bell: “Questions bring freedom... that I don’t have to pretend that I have it all figured out” (p. 30).

My reflection: What a relief! A relief for students, teachers, and just people in general trying to live their lives!

**Autonomy in Literacy**

Based on what has been addressed up to now about the learner, I find myself believing that one needs to feel a sense of autonomy in the act of learning. Instead of learning choices being made for students, the students themselves need to be making choices about learning. *(Side note: I was faced with a new set of questions this year as a teacher: How do students actually get to the point of making choices, especially if they have never been given the chance before? How do I introduce them to this autonomous learning environment? I heard before that a circus animal that only knows to walk in circles, once given freedom, will continue to walk in circles. How*
do I keep that from happening with my students?) The question then becomes, “What if a student makes a wrong choice?” As long as the student is making choices based on personal reflection and response to what he knows about himself as a learner (along with the teacher as a guide), the choices will be responsible and of good quality because he knows what will be most useful and meaningful at any given point in his learning (Smith, 1998). It is this notion of student choice-making that develops metacognitive awareness within the student. This awareness then brings with it a sense of responsibility for the student to make the best choices for his learning.

The following is a journal entry written after reading an article about small learning communities (Copland & Boatright, 2004):

“I could tell that while I was reading, I was really wanting to see how the content and ideas presented in the article were connected to inquiry and literacy development. At first, I must admit that I felt lost, like maybe I was reading the wrong thing. I know that I had chosen the article for a specific reason, but that reason was over a week ago. As I trudged through, I just kept asking questions. I had to stop, think, reread, talk it out with my husband, and jot down some things before “getting it”. I’m realizing that if you want to “see” something, you’ll have your brain try out several avenues to get there... and you will get there... or somewhere... eventually.” It’s not necessarily about the destination, but respecting the process.

I learned something about myself as a learner. When I am on a quest, I am determined to make the most of it. My learning matters to me... especially the time that I invest into it. Therefore, even if it is a little nugget of “This is why this didn’t
work”, my learning is validated because I know more about myself as a learner, which only leads to a deeper literacy development through this lifelong inquiry.

It is this sense of responsibility that actually guides the autonomy of the student and his learning. Not only does responsibility give the student guidance, but it also motivates the student to learn. Instead of being told what to do, which may or may not be appropriate in his state of learning, causing possible resistance, the student knows what to do because he has developed a sense of self-awareness as a learner. This notion of autonomy should not be taken to the extreme, however, that the teacher has no part in the student’s learning experience. The teacher’s responsibility is that of a guide and door opener. The teacher guides the student in his awareness and purpose in learning by asking questions to help him reflect on the learning. It is also the responsibility of the teacher, after the student has developed a sense of purpose for his learning, to give him every opportunity possible to have meaningful learning experiences through various available resources. It is through these meaningful experiences that the learner’s engagement will deepen, as well as complex decision-making, problem solving, and communication skills. It is this autonomy as described above that leads to durability in literacy.

“I know that you are smart and I know that you think you are doing what is best for me. But if freedom is handled just your way then it’s not my freedom or free” (Morrison, 1999, p. 12). Three school-aged children in Toni Morrison’s The Big Box are the victims of freedom suppression by adults. They found out quickly that if their choices did not line up with those of the adults, that they obviously could not handle
their “freedom”. This so-called freedom no longer appealed to them, resulting in their isolation from the community and a distaste for the environment in which they lived.

A similar notion of suppressing one’s freedom was occurring in my school district around the time that I had read Morrison’s (1999) book. In some cases, students were victims of freedom suppression, but district-wide, it was the teachers whose freedom was being suppressed. How? Professional development. Nothing new had happened during this particular school year in terms of professional development. Just as it had been in the past, professional development was determined for the teachers – content, dates, and frequency – without the input from those that were supposed to actually do the “learning”. What made this school year noticeable was the reaction and outrage of the “learners”.

Teachers noticed very quickly that the “learning” lacked purpose. Professional development sessions were viewed as isolated events in which the “learning” was stagnant, spinning in the murky waters of to-do lists. Teachers did not feel as though they were treated as “professionals”, nor did they feel like they were being “developed” as learners. The final kicker was that student achievement was not affected through this professional development.

Because the teachers did not see themselves as involved in any useful and purposeful learning, they either shut down during these meetings or they just simply skipped. Yes, they would rather take a pay cut than sit through hours of meetings that were unrelated to the needs of the hundreds of students they were to teach for 180
days out of the year. Professional development as we knew it was not working. It had not been working for some time now. The learners needed a sense of autonomy.

**Durability in Literacy**

Brian Cambourne (1988) describes literacy’s durability as a combination of observing the following: 1) the learner’s engagement with reading and writing being so worthwhile that he will continue to use it for the rest of his life (*notice the verb “use”, as opposed to “do”*); 2) the learner’s decisions beyond formal instruction to turn to books/texts for information, pleasure, escape, or learning (*notice how this is a reflection of the learner’s attitude toward learning*); 3) the learner’s continued use of writing for solving problems, clarification, learning, and communication (*notice that there is a purpose*) (p. 5). Whether or not a learner’s literacy will be durable depends on the modeling and learning environment he experiences. If the teacher implies or directly says to a student that he does not yet have the abilities to do a learning task, how probable would it be for him to make a serious attempt at it? If a teacher conveys to the class that the learning task at hand is something that “everyone has to do, whether the teacher and students want to or not”, will quality learning take place? According to Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development mentioned earlier, entire areas of learning will be blocked from the student, promoting merely literacy with conditions. (*Side note: Are there not substantial differences between relationships with conditions and those without? How is the depth of understanding between two people connected to the conditions (or lack of) placed on the*
relationship? Is this not also true for learning through relationships (learning in context)? If conditions are present, how do they affect the learning and the learner?)

In order for durability of literacy to occur, the student must see the learning as useful, non-threatening, purposeful, and worth any risks that might be involved. The student needs to be able to trust the teacher. Unless the teacher is completely honest with the student, spilling every intention and purpose behind each learning activity, the teacher will not receive complete buy-in by the student. (Another personal connection... When my husband and I began “dating” we had a talk. I proceeded to tell him that I ended a previous relationship with someone by saying, “I’m pretty sure I’m not going to marry you, so I think we should just break up.” It probably wasn’t the kindest way of putting it, but I learned that by not addressing “purpose” when entering a relationship, hurt and false assumptions can occur. So, building on my literacy of relationships, I told my husband (“person of interest” at the time) that I was dating him for the purpose of finding out whether or not I should marry him. Lucky for me, his purpose was the same. And, because of the discussion of “agenda” and “purpose”, we began the relationship built on trust... a necessity for the durability of any relationship.)

The breakdown of professional development in my district came because of a very simple, yet significant, gap of understanding – the “Why?”. Just as many teachers are guilty of in the classroom, professional development leaders had covered the “How?” of learning by providing “necessary” and “quality” tools and strategies for teachers to use in the classroom. However, the professional development leaders
had not considered any significant and specific evidence that pointed to why they wanted educators to devote “learning time” to these tools and strategies.

Confession/reflection: How many times have I done a “cool” activity or lesson with my students just because they would like it? In an effort to critically reflect...The activity’s quality, in terms of engagement (the “how”) and credibility (the “why”), if not considered, unfolds into the nonsensical, much like learning random facts if there is no data or evidence to point to its purpose. So, even if research backs up such “quality” learning strategies as those from Classroom Instruction That Works (Marzano, 2001), for example, one must first ask, “What assessment have I done to know my learners, and what evidence can I use from it to plan for the next day?”

The teacher also has a responsibility to the student by allowing him to make decisions about his learning. As human beings, we have a natural inclination to wonder and to question. It is that inclination that drives our learning far beyond traditional schooling. When a student is allowed choice, there is more opportunity for durability of literacy because the student is acting upon his desire and need for learning. All he needs at that point is guidance from the teacher and other knowledgeable peers with previous experience in that which he is curious.

It is this concept of genuine and purposeful curiosity and collaboration that drives the learning environment of the inquiry-based classroom. It is where meaningful learning takes place, learning that evolves with each experience, guided
by other learners also seeking out relevant and useful knowledge that will prove to be helpful in the future. It is this inquiry that will bring durability.

_In an attempt to transition between literacy and inquiry, let me share more from my personal reading experience._ Rob Bell (2005) reveals how people read and understood the Bible before the printing press made it possible for people to own personal copies of the text. He notes, “The Bible is a communal book. It came from people writing in communities, and it was often written to communities... Reading the Bible alone was unheard of, if people could even read. For most of church history, people heard the Bible read aloud in a room full of people. You heard it, discussed it, studied it, argued about it, and made decisions about it as a group, a community...You saw yourself and those around you as taking part in a huge discussion that has gone on for thousands of years” (p. 51-2). This tells me that it is integral that a student should not attempt to learn alone, but that he should share his learning experience with others, constructing new learning, which will inform his pursuit of his now transforming questions. To ignore the rich culture and history of those around us during our journey of learning is to ignore the limitations we are placing upon ourselves (and others) for making such a choice.

This is not to say that one is not able to learn alone. There are times that we have no choice but to learn alone. However, when a learner makes a choice to learn collaboratively, he is recognizing the other person as a learner who can potentially contribute in a critically constructive way. He recognizes that learning possibilities expand when welcoming an additional perspective. The learning then begins to move
into the “critical” realm when, through collaboration, the learner approaches new learning with self-reflection and a willingness to admit to and possibly change established or pre-established assumptions. (In thinking about this through my revisions... Who do I trust to engage with in these critical learning adventures? Do I trust just anyone? I don’t think that I do. With that said, how do I build trust with and among my students for the “critical” in learning to take place... not only take place in the classroom, but take place in the world outside of the classroom? Also, how is trust built between and among teachers and administrators in order to create a critical learning environment for professional development?)

Principles of Inquiry

In order to understand the relationship between inquiry and literacy, one must understand the nature of inquiry and its guiding principles. Freire’s (1974) just might be the hand to begin unfolding these principles, for he said, “the class is a meeting place where knowledge is sought, not transmitted” (p. 133). It is this visual of the seeking learner we must start with to understand just what inquiry-based learning means.

Immersion is one of many guiding principles of inquiry, insisting that the learner must be immersed in visual and aural text in order that she might learn literate behaviors. Inquiry also assumes that the learner is driven by purpose in her quest for learning. This is not determined in isolation, but rather through the naturally social processes of learning, as previously noted. The inquiry process, misconceived as chaotic or directionless, is actually quite process-driven in nature; it urges the learner
to develop questions, to research, to observe, reflect and respond. It is then through this process that the learner organizes her new learning by means of relationship.

Although it might appear that the teacher does not have a role in the inquiry process, he actually has a rather integral role of giving the learner a sense of autonomy by providing her with various learning opportunities, guiding her with questions, and simply modeling what learners do. It is through this process, which will be revealed more thoroughly in the next sections, that durability of literacy is made possible.

*Inquiry is Immersion*

An environment conducive to inquiry requires total immersion in text (Cambourne, 1988). The classroom needs to be a place where there is opportunity for and availability of text. Not only do students need to have available to them different levels of various perspectives and genres of text, but they also need to see text around the room that they can immediately draw knowledge from. For example, hanging around the room could be examples of student work, word walls, learned concepts, etc. It is necessary for the student to be immersed in different written forms in order for her to be able to use and control those forms (Cambourne, 1988). Immersion will also prove to be more powerful if the student is allowed long and deep immersion. It is through this extension that the student will have more opportunities for making connections, drawing inferences, and developing awareness of what’s going on in the text. It is this last notion of “meta-textual awareness” (Cambourne, 1988) that allows students to gain understanding and control over the text forms and features.
Not only do students need immersion in visual text, they also need immersion in aural text. This type of immersion might come in the form of teacher read-alouds or reader’s theatre, for example, from which the student learns meaning of text through inflection, pacing and tone of voice by those that are modeling. Once again, I would like to point out that through aural and visual text immersion, students learn what readers (and writers) do. It becomes real. It becomes meaningful. It becomes purposeful.

When I began my thesis work, I knew that I needed to truly immerse myself in text and conversations. I read, I took notes, I journaled, I dialogued with others, I listened and watched the “text” of the world. It was necessary for my learning. I must admit, though, that I became anxious after about a month of immersion. I thought that surely I should be getting some of this thesis writing done. I felt this push to produce. The problem was that I had no idea what to do with the information yet. I hadn’t organized it yet. I had a focus question, but I hadn’t figured out how all of it fit together. What did I have to show for the month of study? I scratched down some notes in margins of texts and journaled in a ratty composition book, but there was nothing to be “proud” of, nothing of publishable quality. I was to meet with my thesis advisor, and I had no physical document to prove what I had done. Even in my attempts at discussing what I had been reading and writing were “failures” in my eyes because they seemed an incoherent mess! I was just trying to make sense of it all. I truly believed that I was learning. I just wasn’t at the point of “getting it down”.
All of this anxiety made me think of my own experience as a learner growing up in school (What does that mean – “growing up in school”?). It was all about the product, not the process. I was given information and then expected to do something with it. This was not what I had been learning about learning lately. The essence of learning occurs in the approximating, the disequilbria, the ZPD, not the finished product (Is it ever really “finished” anyway?).

Confession/reflection: What amount of time am I allowing for my students to experience immersion, approximation, disequilbria, and the ZPD? Or, am I, to some extent, teaching to assess, rather than assessing to teach (Fecho, 2004)?

Inquiry is Purposeful

Major misconceptions of inquiry-based learning are that the students will not learn what they “need to learn”, they will learn the “wrong” things, or their learning is directionless (Smith, 1998; Dewey, 1938). The resistance to inquiry stems from the teacher feeling like he will lose control of the students’ learning. This mistrust is unnecessary. First of all, it is important to reiterate the whole concept of the student being in control of his learning. The student will learn whether one wants him to or not. In fact, the student will not stop learning (Smith, 1998). Secondly, the role of the teacher in an inquiry-based learning environment is that of a guide. He is responsible to the students, their needs and desires as learners, and for promoting purposeful learning.

In the inquiry-based classroom, there is still a place for teacher-guided, whole-class learning. The idea behind this is not the traditional form of “stand and deliver”,
by which the students receive what knowledge the teacher imparts. Rather, this is a
time when the teacher guides the students through a learning process through
questions to help move their thinking. By posing questions (and allowing students to
do the same), the teacher is modeling thinking processes that the students can use
later in their individual forms of inquiries. Also, by allowing the students to develop
new knowledge, rather than just accepting it from the deliverer (*Hmm... so many
meanings in that word.*), they will understand it more deeply and be more likely able
to use it and manipulate it to develop new understandings in the future. By allowing
them to go through the necessary processes, they have a feeling of ownership of the
new learning, which develops a sense of success. Again, this is another pathway to
durability. It is a process that demonstrates what literate individuals do.

The next common misconception of students learning the “wrong” things is a
concern of teachers even in the traditional classroom. The push for perfect learning is
an unfortunate epidemic in our schools. Stemming from the marriage of high-stakes
testing and financial security of schools, students are pressured to learn everything
perfectly, making no mistakes. The most common suggestion to eliminate mistake-
making is the so-called strategy of teaching-to-the-test (Passman, 2001). However, it
is in the mistake-making that learning is discovered. A mistake made by a student
reveals much to the teacher about her thinking processes involved in making the
mistake (Smith, 1998). The appropriate reflex of the teacher in this situation is to ask
questions of the student to help her reflect on the thinking she did to craft the product.
It is then in this analysis that the learner understands the “how” and the “why” of the
problem, which will then extend to her next learning experience (Smith, 1998). Just as a person must understand why he has faith in something in order for it to be significant and valuable, the learner must understand why something is “right” or “good” in her learning in order for it to be significant and valuable. What exactly is seen as “valuable” in test-driven practices? Is it learning? Are students even allowed to ask “Why?” in a high-stakes testing environment?

Lastly, to address the misconception of inquiry as “directionless”, it is essential for one to understand that an important principle of inquiry is purpose. Typically, the individual inquiries are an extension of the whole class learning. It is during the individualized learning that long and deep immersion occurs, as Cambourne (1988) suggests, guided by a purpose. This purpose needs to be established by the learner and his needs and desires as a learner (Rosenblatt, 1995) in order to direct his experiences in the learning process (Dewey, 1938). It is then the teacher’s job to give the learner opportunities for these experiences and help guide him through the learning process. Paulo Freire (1974) describes the role of the educator as follows:

The educator’s role is fundamentally to enter into dialogue with the illiterate about concrete situations and simply to offer him the instruments with which he can teach himself to read and write. This teaching cannot be done from the top down, but only from the inside out, by the illiterate himself, with the collaboration of the educator (p. 43).
Also, take note that the guiding not only can be done by the teacher, but by others that have had previous experiences related to the purposeful inquiry of the learner. These persons, with whom the learner has relationships, are able to offer these “concrete situations” or familiar situations to the learner because of the established relationships. So, the more trust built by collaboration, which is built upon relationships, the more possibility there will be for critical learning experiences for all learners involved. And, it is when this inquiry process is recognized as being process-driven that the learners involved (teacher included) see the learning as purposeful… It’s not just something that is done by a group of people. It is an intentional dialogue among the persons involved.

Inquiry is Process-Driven

It is also the process-driven method of learning behind inquiry that ensures literacy’s durability. Summarizing what Dewey (1938) understands about experiential learning, one can organize inquiry as a spiraling process of essentially four chapters: 1) formation of ideas; 2) acting upon ideas; 3) observation of result/consequence; 4) organization (& reorganization) of facts and ideas for future use (p. 69). Just as one might flip back to previous chapters of a book for a better understanding, the learner is encouraged to go back to previous chapters in her inquiry, thus the spiraling notion. This notion became reality for me just in the process of writing this thesis, as noted in Chapter I. As a responsible learner, I could not merely leave my writing as it was previously, for much more learning and reorganization of ideas and understandings had occurred. So, just as I had to adjust
how I represented my understandings for my reader, so do learners adjust their inquiry processes for their determined purposes.

As I tread these waters – thesis writing – I find the inevitable happening... I am reminded of something I read, heard, wrote, or spoke years ago. I notice my learning spiraling to make sense of the past in terms of the present learning. I find the past learning no less valuable. In fact, it is quite opposite. Even the ugliest of learning experiences, I’ve found, can become quite exquisite in depth and newly found precision of “aha!” As Bell (2005) notes, “The rabbis spoke of the text being like a gem with seventy facets, and each time you turn the gem, the light refracts differently, giving you a reflection you haven’t seen before. And so we turn the text again and again because we keep seeing things we missed the time before” (p. 60). So again, I am mesmerized by the marbling of old and new learning upon rereading and reflection. The puzzle is pieced together in a new way. Insight sets in as reorganization takes place.

As noted before, learners have a need and a desire to organize information in order to make sense of it. If organization is needed to develop one’s literacy, the design of the inquiry process fits this notion of organizing and making sense of ideas. As the learner reflects and analyzes his learning, he is utilizing and developing his literacy to organize new knowledge. So, by moving through the inquiry process, one actually develops his literacy. Furthermore, the notion of inquiry embodying purpose, learner responsibility, autonomy, relevance, and significance encourages the expectation that the learner’s literacy will be durable.
Inquiry is Reflective and Active

Up to this point, I have explained how inquiry addresses literacy’s durability in terms of environment (immersion), purpose, organization for meaning, and autonomy. However, we have yet to discover the significant learning that takes place in the inquiry-based learning environment. As stated in a previous section, one’s learning needs to go through a series of processes in order for ownership of the new knowledge to take place (zone of proximal development). However, significance of learning is not assumed unless the learner has the opportunity during immersion to respond, reflect, and create.

The process of significant learning I refer to is Louise M. Rosenblatt’s (1995) theory of transaction. She asserts that transaction is “the relation between reader and signs on the page proceeding in a to-and-fro spiral, in which each is continually being affected by what the other has contributed” (p. 26). As was mentioned previously about organization in literacy, one relies on relationships to build meaning and organization of new learning. In the notion of transaction, the text does not assume that the reader comes with a blank page and pen to take notes.

What Rosenblatt (1995) suggests in her theory of transaction is that the reader/learner approaches the text with a notebook full of past experiences with notes in the margins. Not only does the reader come equipped with a worn notebook, but he also comes with a pencil, not a pen. For it is with the pencil that one has the ability to reconstruct knowledge, not claiming the conclusion or law of learning, but rather a notion of significance for the moment. It is then with the pencil that the reader
responds and reflects upon his inquiry, not only on the pages of his notebook, but in the margins of the text. It is at this moment that he is “co-authoring” for the purpose of significant learning, with the possibility of what Freire (1974) describes as “beings of “praxis” – of action and of reflection” (p. 93). One should notice at this point that Rosenblatt’s theory of transaction walks hand-in-hand with the notion of inquiry, as she further explains that “the reader approaches the text with a certain purpose, certain expectations or hypotheses that guide his choices from the residue of past experience” (p. 26). The purpose, expectations, and residue she speaks of are all located in the notebook of which I speak.

It is this notebook of experience, the learner’s evidence of a working literacy, that drives the learning. For, every experience brings about change. It is at this point that the learner has a choice of what the extent of that change will be. Will he choose a path of transformation (Freire, 1970), by which he not only chooses to change the environment or situation of his learning world, but also the learner within and how he perceives himself within his world? I believe it is an intentional choice by the learner to change to the depth of transformation, as Freire suggests. A shift will naturally occur with every experience, as noted by Vygotsky’s (1978) notion of ZPD, however a transformational shift occurs not naturally, but intentionally by choice of the learner. It must be said, then, that dialogue and an established trust through significant relationships among collaborative learners must be in place for such transformative changes to occur within and among learners, as noted in previous sections of this
chapter. Without such a relational foundation, transformation may not even be considered an option by the learner.

To continue the discussion on inquiry’s impact on significance in literacy development, in light of what has been said about change, after a meaningful experience, that experience then influences the environment for further experiences (Dewey, 1938, p. 27). In order to avoid any misconceptions, let me again clarify that these experiences cannot be linked by means of artificial relationships or no relationships at all for significant learning to take place. It is based upon these artificial or non-existent relationships that teaching skills in isolation proceeds. In the learner’s world, these “skills” are haphazardly scribbled by pen on note cards, stuffed in a folder (assuming one is available), disorganized at best, but most likely lost in the chaotic movement from one corner of learning to the next. Therefore, purpose, expectation, and relevance must be the foundation for significant learning, which comes through relationships built upon response, reflection, and creation of new learning, all within the context of trust.

I’ve heard that one must make the choice to love another. In fact, the relationship itself is based upon a choice. Is the same true for relationships in learning as previously mentioned? Freire (1974) made the statement: “Education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage. It cannot fear the analysis of reality or, under pain of revealing itself as a farce, avoid creative discussion (p. 33). I see this play out each Sunday as I make a conscious choice to read the aural and written text prepared by my spiritual teacher. I have learned that to deny the learning of my life
on Sunday – to not acknowledge the joys, sorrows and convictions that are true and deep and present – is to deny the learning experience that could occur, full of purpose, expectation, and relevance. I’ve learned that it only makes sense for me to bring my baggage because I have a good idea of where I’m headed, and the “clothes” inside are proof of that knowledge. Bell (2005) says, “Nobody is objective…The idea that everybody else approaches the Bible with baggage and agendas and lenses and I don’t is the ultimate in arrogance. To think that I can just read the Bible without reading any of my own culture or background or issues into it and come out with a “pure” or “exact” meaning is not only untrue, but it leads to a very destructive reading of the Bible that robs it of its life and energy” (p. 53, 54). I seek to learn. One must understand, however, that learning is like marriage…it is a relationship based on the principles of giving, receiving, and working together. I admit that I come with an agenda when meeting with a professional development planning committee. However, I also recognize that I am not the only learner, but just one among many. In fact it is in the cooperatively constructed new learning that I feel most empowered and energized. It is in the gathering of literacies and inquiring minds that durable learning relationships form…for better or for worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health...

The Refining Process

In conclusion, I suggest that it is through inquiry-based learning that durability of literacy will occur. As I have painted in the previous sections relating to inquiry, the learner’s experience must be natural to how he develops literacy. The inquiry
method is a natural process of learning that easily adapts to each individual learner. It is not the learner attempting to adapt to processes given to him, as has been the traditional method of education.

Holding true to Brian Cambourne’s (1988) definition of literacy, and using what has been discussed so far of literacy and inquiry, I wish to show how the principles of inquiry promote and are connected to the elements of literacy.

I first introduced Cambourne’s (1988) notion of behavior as an element of literacy. It is through learned behaviors that literacy initially develops. Inquiry’s principle of immersion promotes the establishment of one’s identity as a literate person. When a learner is immersed in visual and aural text, she experiences learning within context, which is altogether more useful to her than isolated experiences with text.

Skills, as an extension of immersion, are durable over time only if the learner sees the purpose in learning. The inquiry-based classroom, whether during whole-class instruction or student-driven learning, does not assume authenticity of learning until purpose has been established. For inquiry without purpose is meaningless for the learner, just as skills taught in isolation does not develop the growth of the learner.

Also, to develop one’s literacy, knowledge and the processes needed to develop and then use that knowledge are both critical. Inquiry’s response to these elements is process-driven in nature. Through means of setting a purpose, posing questions, and guided research, the learner not only reflects upon but also reconstructs his learning, in an effort to organize it by making sense of the new
knowledge through relationships with previous experiences. Through the inquiry process, the learner owns the new knowledge and is able to give a new dimension to it through reflection and action.

Finally, an integral element in one’s durability of literacy is attitude, for it is the attitude of the learner that acts as the barometer for his learning. Inquiry makes a positive attitude possible through its principle of autonomy. It is through the learner’s autonomy that his needs as a learner are more accurately met. He knows best what his needs and desires are as a learner. Therefore, autonomy gives him the capacity for setting a purpose and goals for new knowledge. It is through this autonomy that he is able to develop the processes necessary to use and make sense of his learning.

When all of the elements of inquiry are working together to develop the learner’s literacy, the enhancement of her literacy is perpetuated by the continued spiral-like motion of learning through inquiry. A reciprocal effect takes place, in which her developing literacy actually refines the act of inquiry, based on what she has discovered through the zone of proximal development. For, the more ownership the learner has of her literacy, the more purposeful she can be in her inquiry. This, in turn, will extend her literacy as she reflects, organizes, and reconstructs throughout her learning. Indeed, it is through this natural relationship between inquiry and literacy that life-long learning and durability lives and breathes.
CHAPTER IV
COURTING AND WOOING: UNPACKING THE METHODOLOGY

For this research project, extensive reading was necessary to develop an understanding of the breadth of literature encompassing the goal of defining what learning is, its purpose, and how one functions throughout the process of learning. The selection of literature came about in various ways. A general browsing of literature served the purpose of discovering just how expansive and valued my chosen course of study was. A re-reading of literature was also imperative, as I had encountered several texts during my graduate studies which served as guides, steering me towards this very study. Just as important, were the texts, which upon a first glance, may not seem connected to this study. They served the purpose of showing how I make connections between disparate texts to form a more in depth understanding of my own learning.

Text Selection Criteria

Previous Experience – Dewey (1938), Freire (1974), Vygotsky (1978), Cambourne (1988), Fecho (2004). I selected these writers based on past experiences in my undergraduate and graduate studies. They intrigued me upon first reading, and in some cases, left me in need of a second read. The more I pursued inquiry, literacy, and the implications of multicultural education, the more I returned to these writers. Recognizing that three of the five texts noted were written before I had even entered school, I wrestled with their theories and how they applied to the educational system today. As I combined all five, I found how well they support each other, which
guided me in my own understandings of what it means to be a learner. As noted before, re-reading was necessary, along with comparing of notes and journal entries written with each text at different times. I noticed that in my revisiting of these texts, my understandings had more depth and clarity and my own practice as an educator was challenged.

Trusted Recommendations – Bisplinghoff (2002), Freire (1970), Freire & Macedo (1987), Rosenblatt (1995), Smith (1998). These writers were recommended to me by professionals with whom I have much in common. I suppose that says something about how one makes choices about learning. There are certain booklists and reviewers that we trust and others that we tend to laugh at. Usually, it’s by trial and error in those cases. However, since I know the people in this particular case who have recommended certain texts, I have accepted and read them with anticipation. I admit that because of such relationships one can be swayed towards a certain perception; however, it is important to note that these relationships I speak of are built upon what I had defined in Chapter I about the term “critical”. It is quite clear that when we dialogue, we dialogue critically. In fact, it is practically assumed that cognitive conflict will occur… not for the sake of “argument” but learning.

Interest-Based (academic) – Ciardiello (2003), Jackson (2004), Cushman (2006), Cushman & Rowley (2003), Copland & Boatright (2004). These writers came into play merely through a search for more resources. Keywords that I used in my search were critical inquiry, critical pedagogy, and literacy. I found these readings helpful in supporting the theorists I had previous experience with in a way that was
rather practical. Most importantly, I found professional application through these
texts. They served a purpose in rounding out the academic portion of research,
bringing clarity to ideas presented by theorists that I was reading and re-reading.
Also, I must admit that sometimes my mind gets a little “sore” when reading texts by
theorists, in which case I will reach for more practical reading to support the learning,
but not bring my mind to a state of exhaustion.

Connected Literature – Bell (2005), Morrison (1999), Marzano (2001). These
texts came into play through the learning process. As I read, wrote, and dialogued
with others, I found myself thinking upon other things that I had been reading or had
previously read that related to my study. None of these texts were intentionally
selected for this study; in fact, the Morrison (1999) book was referred to in a dialogue.
Sometimes there are things, which at first glance, seem unrelated that end up helping
one make sense of the ideas being wrestled with. Such is the case with these texts.

Although I may not have specifically referred to all of the texts noted in the
bibliography, each one played a part in developing my understandings of the learning
process. In some instances, I found a text to be very “quotable” within my writing,
whereas others served the purpose of kindling for the fire. Just because a text was not
referenced, does not mean that it was not integral. I believe all of the reading was
integral because it served a purpose in the development of my understandings.

Response

Alongside reading of text, I also created my own text through journals, logs,
and conversations. These methods of learning served the purpose of clarifying new
learning, connecting old with new learning, and revising my thinking. This self-created text also served as reading material along the way for me to analyze my own learning process.

Reflection

Not only did I re-read the written text that I created, but I also re-read the conversational text created with others. This action might be easily defined as reflection. However, it was through the reflection that I was able to plan next steps for learning. Reflection was just as integral a part as the initial browsing of literature.
EPILOGUE

THE PROPOSAL

The institution known as “education” has come to a critical point in its life, as I see it. I teach in a district in which the graduating class is half the size it was when entering its freshman year. True, life has its obstacles and adventures that take individuals down different paths. However, my concern lays with the path education offers. It is one thing to look at the possibilities way down the road; it’s another thing to trudge through the flooded streets of so-called learning in order to get to the possibility.

Humans have proven over the years that they have a knack for survival. They learn from their mistakes (for the most part) and make different and smarter choices along the way. My questions lay with education: What will be the method of survival for our schools? What will happen when school is no longer perceived by those who must attend as a credible institution for furthering society? What will be the next federal mandate to ensure the pulse of education? Will it work?

I’ve found through this study that learning is messy. I’ve also found that mandating structure, content, and assessment that signify all that is irrelevant to a learner, places the learner in the state of a mess. Without relevance, without buy-in, without exploration, and without the permission to make mistakes, education in schools will become the biggest joke economically, politically, culturally, and internationally.
If education continues its modus operandi, funding will continue to plummet because of a distorted sense of “vision”; political leaders will fight over the next best, mandated, clean-cut program to “straighten up those teachers and students”; curricula will become stagnate, reflecting either the dominate culture or merely a taste test of approved cultures (which may already be a reality in some schools); and, we will have, at best, a superficial relationship with the international community. Is this survival?

Until the institution of education along with its constituents respects the learner in terms of her purposeful pursuit of learning and the reflective process of teaching and learning, nothing of any substance will come out of it. Until this institution stops forcing the unnatural in place of what is natural, learning will continue to be a chore and, quite possibly, torture for learners.

It’s not just about the survival of education; it’s about the survival of the human race. If learners are taught that exploration is dangerous, that their ideas are not worthwhile, that if they don’t “get it”, they need to double the time spent doing “it” so that they can “get it”, the outcome will be their predetermined understandings of what it means to be uninspired and apathetic. It is imperative to note that this lack of inspiration and prevalence of apathy is not residing merely with students; teachers and administrators are also learners and need to receive respect, acknowledgement, and encouragement to explore their own learning, which will in effect benefit the learning of students. The more an administrator learns about herself as a learner, the more she will acknowledge the reflective nature of the teacher as a learner, and the
more the teacher will encourage such pursuits of his students. If the institution of education is not founded on the principles of a learning organization, in which there is buy-in, critical inquiry and reflection, and appreciation for learning, it will certainly crumble.

A simple analysis of the education institution in terms of Maslow’s (1970) hierarchy of needs may clarify what changes must take place in order for its survival and growth. Acknowledging that Maslow’s needs build upon each other and that when “learner” is used, it refers to all learners, let us take into consideration each step of his hierarchy of needs. First, schools must provide a welcoming environment that is sturdy, clean, and in proper working condition for its learners. Second, learners need to feel safe physically and emotionally in their learning environment. Learners also need a sense of belonging in their learning environment. If trust is not present, will collaboration have a chance? Learners must receive recognition and approval to feel significant in their learning world. Whether it is publishing student work, giving praise to a teacher at a staff meeting, or recognition of administration peers at a school board presentation, people need to know that what they do matters to others. Learners will begin to experience a sense of growth when they are given opportunities toward intellectual achievement. When a learner’s understanding of an area increases, so does her desire to learn and study further. Learners’ needs progress further to aesthetic appreciation of such abstract notions such as truth and beauty. It is at this point that the learner begins affecting others through the sensed fulfillment of needs provided by his learning environment. Finally, the learner needs to develop the
characteristics of a self-actualized learner: a clear perception of reality, acceptance of self and others, autonomous and independent, sympathetic to others, creativity, ability to establish meaningful relationships with others (Eggen & Kauchak 1999, p. 409).

I propose that without a critical inquiry approach to learning (by all parties involved), literacy, as defined in this thesis, will not be firmly established in learners. The needs previously noted are naturally required when taking a critical inquiry approach to learning, which, through careful review is education’s pathway to survival, sustainability, capacity, and significance in the global society.
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