

# **We Are Only Without Voice If We Do Not Speak**

Guest Editorial Introduction

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The College of Education at Kansas State University is delighted to welcome *Literacy Connections* to the family of journals hosted within the college. Editors Drs. Suzanne Porath, Lori Goodson, and Vicki Sherbert, along with the initial design team of Drs. Angela Kraemer-Holland and Ambyr Rios, have established this venue for scholarship developed by our community of literacy educators as a labor of love and an effort to bring forward the voices of teachers seeking to reflect upon and deepen their practice. I thank them for this effort, and I know the journal will give voice to both established and emerging voices in this discipline central to American educational systems.

Today more than ever, our profession needs to hear from teachers and classrooms. We are surrounded by very loud voices not connected to classrooms: the industries that feed on developing new programs and system; policy makers and public figures using schools and children to amplify ideology; and media personalities building their personal brands by highlighting items—usually cherry picked and out-of-context—from American education in order to generate airtime and clicks.

We do not hear nearly enough from teachers. Those other voices and interests not grounded in daily practice will not go away. In fact, I would argue those outside voices should not go away. Spirited and free public debate from all who would speak is an essential feature of our system that has served us well over time, but it's participation across the spectrum of interests is essential. I have observed over the years that sometimes it is the quiet voices we most need to hear, and beyond the walls of schools, teachers are notoriously quiet. It is up to our profession to speak up and be heard.

It is my hope that the space provided here can offer teachers and teacher educators a fresh, accessible opportunity to explore their practice, their challenges and their successes, in rigorous insightful ways. Teaching and scholarship are not contradictory terms. The best teaching is that which is reflectively practiced and relentlessly examined toward advancing our profession from the ground level. What happens in classrooms between teachers and students is really, at the end of the day, what matters.

Above I made the claim that literacy is central to the enterprise of education. With all due respect to other academic disciplines, I have always believed this to be true. From the kindergartener engaging in reading readiness activities to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade student approaching sophisticated texts (and on through the life that will follow), it is through our literacies that we define and shape our worlds.

A quarter century ago, as we were confronting what was then anticipated as Y2K, it was fashionable to rank the most important people of the 1000-year period that was closing. While that sort of thing is clearly arbitrary, the one name that emerged again and again was Johannes

Gutenberg. Putting aside arguments for other key figures, the case for the inventor of the printing press is telling, as the spread of mass literacy transformed the nature of our existence as a species. Looking forward to the next 1000 years (and beyond), I firmly believe the advancement of our literacies is as best hope for a future that resists the pull toward the dystopian. Advances in the technologies of communication have given us access to powerful new ways to engage in the ancient arts of storytelling and rhetoric. The coming generations of students who will become citizens simply must have better skills as both consumers and creators of communication in forms and genres that are developing in real time around us. Interwoven into the skills of reading, writing, listening, speaking and viewing, we also need to find better ways to foster an ethic of wisdom because these powerful communication technologies that exist today (or are on the horizon) can both liberate and imprison. It might be a useful analogy to imagine for a moment the early decades after Guttenberg's press allowed for the ever-greater distribution of printed materials. Imagine next the challenges that must have faced those first waves of teachers opening the doors of literacy to layers of society with no communications experience beyond the deeply ingrained structures of the oral culture.

We cannot lose sight of the basic responsibilities in which we are entrusted, the teaching of the building blocks of reading and writing. In fact, we need to do a much better job of extending what we might think of as basic literacy to groups of students that have not been served as well as we might like—special needs students, students from poverty, students wounded by trauma and English language learners come immediately to mind. Beyond that, we also need to find new and better ways to adapt the sophistication of our work to reflect the sophistication of the messaging our students encounter for the larger communication environment. How we do this is not immediately apparent, but it is undeniably our responsibility as literacy educators to engage ourselves with the deepening of literacy across our society. It is my hope that *Literacy Connections* can serve as a workspace for the development of our collective skills as teachers. We are at a crossroads, and I firmly believe years from now when historians look back to where we are now, our current time will stand out as a critical period in which that which follows us was shaped. As educators, we face cultural, economic and even spiritual challenges in terms of how we define ourselves. These transitional times extend far beyond the enterprise of education, but I have always believed the work that happens within classrooms both reflects and shapes the larger society. It is essential that we participate by joining the on-going dialogues.

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I join with the editors of this new journal and invite literacy educators to make this venue a vital space for your voices. It is more than an opportunity. It is your responsibility.