

*Editorial*

# *Learning How to “Do”: Creating Spaces for “The Missing” in Language and Literacy Curricula and Research*

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“Show me how to do like you  
Show me how to do it”

And so begins Alice Walker’s (1982) *The Color Purple*. Walker’s epigraph connects to the novel’s heroine, Celie, by suggesting that she desires/ requires a model for how to live her life with pride—a model that is perhaps provided in the form of the beautiful songstress, Shug Avery. I (Rachel) had always read this epigraph with the hope that it might equally propose that if we readers pay attention to the workings-out of Celie’s sufferings and pleasures, we might just learn a thing or two about courage and survival. When I was teaching in schools and in my introduction to academia, I transferred this reading to the context of my own life, making “Show me how to do like you/Show me how to do it” the plea I could address to those I perceived as master pedagogues when my own students turned and faced me with a way to learn. I (Luigi) also came to academia with fantasies of finding someone who knew how to do it. Perfection in teaching was never something I believed to be attainable, however, I was sure that an “expert” could provide me with a model of how to “be” in teaching. If it weren’t for

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our encountering of Sharon Rich—not a songstress but an expert teacher and the reference point for this special language and literacy issue of *JCACS*—we might still be looking for someone else’s way to be.

Walker’s epigraph encapsulates the longing for a mentor; someone to tell those of us who are engaged in messy work how to get out of the swamp. What Sharon taught us, however, is that there is no denying the complexity of teaching and learning—particularly as it relates to issues of language and literacy—and that it is an ethical imperative for each of us to negotiate our own way through. While she never named it as such, we think Sharon’s ethics are akin to Drucilla Cornell’s (1992) differentiation between morality and the ethical relation. Cornell’s ethical relation is understood as opposed to “morality,” meaning “any attempt to spell out how one determines a right way to behave,” as it “focuses instead on the kind of person one must become in order to develop a nonviolative relationship to the Other” (p. 13). What Sharon did with us was the epitome of the ethical relation: she took “Show me how to do like you/Show me how to do it” and supported us to do it and be it, *like ourselves*. Yet despite the strength of Sharon’s lesson, it’s one that we must learn again and again, and it is this relearning that is responsible for the issue of *JCACS* you are now reading.

This issue was conceived over the span of a rainy, East coast week in May 2002. We were attending the XXXIst annual CSSE conference in Halifax, Nova Scotia. We noticed that there were some much appreciated senior Canadian language and literacy researchers at the conference, but overall attendance was limited. Feeling disappointed, feeling like we were so new to this academic business, and feeling like, yes, we needed a mentor, I (Rachel) telephoned Sharon to lament that she too was absent from the conference. “Where are all of you to show us how to do this?” I asked her. It was a Saturday night—late—and there was a party going on in the background. Sharon, however, didn’t waver. She plainly said, “*You’re* at the conference. It’s your turn to do some work.”

The next day, we attended the Language Arts Researchers of Canada Annual General Meeting. The turnout was poor—so poor, that with the support of current LLRC President JulieAnn Kniskern, we both got voted onto the executive. Kidding aside, there were some momentous developments at the AGM.

As a membership, we discussed our concerns about the fate and direction of the SIG. We talked about how to reignite, re-conceptualize and refocus the organization. A key element of this revitalization, we decided, involved ensuring that the SIG be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the expansive ways that language and literacy was now being conceptualized. To this end, the membership voted to change the SIG’s name to the Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada. Teresa Dobson of the University of British Columbia, later created a description of the SIG which was adopted by the membership:

LLRC is a special interest group within the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies, which is in turn a constituent association of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education. LLRC is comprised of individuals who are interested in language and literacy education and research, particularly, but not exclusively, within the Canadian context. We define "literacy" broadly, understanding that what it means to be literate is situational, and that individuals generally acquire numerous literacies as they navigate different linguistic spheres. In keeping with this notion, our members promote understanding of literacy acquisition in a range of developmental, socio-cultural, and media contexts.

To publicize LLRC and to help identify and consolidate Canadian language and literacy research, Dennis Sumara suggested that LLRC mount a one-day pre-CSSE conference then publish a special issue of *JCACS*. With the help of many other LLRC members, we took on this task.

The pre-conference was entitled *Identities, Differences, and Discourses in Language and Literacy Learning and Research: Where Have We Been? Where Are We Now? Where Are We Going?* Its goal was to critically analyze the state of language and literacy research, teaching and learning in Canada and consider where researchers' hopes for the future reside. The pre-conference sought to excavate foundational understandings of four interrelated language and literacy traditions: whole language, critical literacies, feminist literacies and post-colonial literacies. This was in keeping with the approach of the "Curriculum Geneologies" section of *JCACS* described by Dennis Sumara and Rebecca Luce-Kapler (2003) as operating from a Foucauldian method that seeks to "remind" readers that "inquiries into the relationships between past and current events is always a critical interpretive practice that aims to discern the way in which particular discourses constitute the objects, practices, and/or subjects that are available for study" (p. 2). Towards accomplishing this task of excavation, Sharon Rich opened the conference with a keynote address that revisited a critical moment in whole language theorizing in Canada, her paper entitled *Restoring Power to Teachers: The Impact of Whole Language* that was first published in *Language Arts* in 1985.

The pre-conference was by all measures a success. In addition to Sharon's keynote address, Dennis Sumara also presented a keynote calling for all dimensions of language and literacy to be considered in research. There was a total of 36 presentations, and presenters represented a wide spectrum of language and literacy theories and methodologies, academic and professional experiences and geographic locales. About 60 people representing more than 19 different educational institutions attended the pre-conference. At the end of an exhausting day, we nevertheless felt a renewed sense of community and an excitement about the future of Canadian language and literacy research. The pre-conference had provided a forum for dialogue

around disparate views of language and literacy and for the sharing of work that is not widely publicized.

There is an increasing need to create such dialogic spaces. Of late, debates about language and literacy have been quelled by mono-method, autonomous and “new phonics”-driven (Pearson, 2001) perspectives (Heydon, Hibbert & Iannacci, 2004/2005). Researchers in Canada have definitely been affected by large-scale, well-promoted and funded research that highlights the neurological dimension of learning to “read”. We do our work in an era during which reductionistic approaches to literacy and research have been problematized (see Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Luke, 1998; Taylor, 1998) and scholar’s definitions of literacy have accented the social, cultural, affective and multimodal (Jewitt & Kress, 2003) elements of language and literacy. Yet the research studies that have received the best levels of funding and the most publicity in the media are those that reduce language and literacy to discrete skills in reading (for example, Adams, 1990; Adams, Foorman, Lundberg & Becker, 1998; Stanovich, 1986). Anything “other” is apt to be accused of being “empty theorizing” or “fad[ish]” (McGuinness, 1999, p. xiii).

This issue of *JCACS* construes language and literacy as commensurate with LLRC’s definition to which we would add that literacy practices are dependent upon a sophisticated combination of physical, cognitive, affective and discursive factors. Such complexity and context-dependency demands that there be diversity in research. We need questions, methodologies and conceptual frameworks that embed a diversity of perspectives. We need reflexive research that considers its potential consequences in people’s lives. We need to ask what form of literacy, literacy practices and literacy pedagogies we privilege in our work. We need to view ourselves as “answerable to concrete others” (Hicks, 2002, p. 154) not only in fiscal terms, which is a current thrust, but in terms of the potential impact of the work in the lives of those we would help. Finally, we need to heed Sharon’s lesson that there is no one way. There is only that ethical imperative to guide our practice as teachers and researchers committed to developing nonviolative relationships with others.

All the papers in this issue are inspired by this ideal of dialogism and giving space to those aspects of language and literacy curricula and research which might otherwise go under-noticed.

True to the pre-conference theme, in the “Curriculum Genealogies” section, Sharon’s keynote address is presented with a re-print of her paper from *Language Arts* (1985). Sharon tells us again that what is often missing in educational decision-making are the knowledges, experiences and the voices of those who often know learners best: their teachers. She encourages us to seek out theories and practices that professionalize teachers and allow them to be responsive to the needs and literacies of their students. It

is with sadness and frustration that we must remark that the point she made in 1985 is one that needs repeating today with even more force.

To further elucidate the strength of Sharon's pedagogy, in the "Curriculum Lives" section, Sandy DeLuca uses the experience of being Sharon's graduate student to discover what is missing in many graduate curriculum courses, namely what she calls a "familial" way of being which includes an attention to the emotional, physical as well as intellectual needs of learners. DeLuca describes how powerful, loving pedagogical relationships can be developed through the medium of narrative, particularly when this medium is enhanced through food and drink.

The theme of (re)inscribing pleasure in learning through the richness of language is picked up in the "Articles" section. Carl Leggo addresses the missing sense of joy in Curriculum Studies and students' and teachers' lives. He calls for the use and appreciation of metaphoric language through poetry to infuse educational spaces with pleasure. Cornelia Hoogland also (re)asserts the importance of metaphoric language and draws attention to what gets lost in Faculties of Education when artistic practice is undervalued.

Narrative, language and the body reappear in the "Curriculum Pedagogies" section. Lesley Shore draws attention to the English curriculum's belying of adolescents' sexual literacy. She suggests the use of literary texts and self-writing as means of helping adolescents explore and develop identities that consider the body. In this same section, Elizabeth de Freitas writes a "fictional" pedagogy to highlight the ways in which various curricula gender language and privilege masculine discourses over the feminine. As such, she calls for a pushing-back against the privileging of philosophical language over narrative language.

The issue's reviews are no exception to this theme of exploring the missing. Rahat Naqvi's description of the Learning Conference 2004 in Havana, Cuba, sheds light on the need to consider equity and social justice in all curricular endeavours, and Karleen Pendelton Jiménez's review of the picture book, *Mom and Mum are Getting Married!* (Setting, 2004) draws attention to emerging representations of familial and sexual diversity.

Being true to the lesson of becoming and to LLRC's commitment to robust and diverse definitions of language and literacy, celebrating the Canadian research community and maintaining spaces for the missing and marginalized, we are pleased to announce the second LLRC pre-CSSE conference entitled *The Pluralization of Literacy: Practices and Positions for Literacy Research*. It is scheduled to take place at next spring's CSSE meeting at the University of Western Ontario.

We are "doing the work" Sharon challenged us to do. We hope that it honours her teachings.

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