

Go Be a Writer!

Expanding the
Curricular Boundaries
of Literacy Learning
with Children

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Foreword by Jennifer Rowsell

Contents

Foreword Jennifer Rowsell	vii
Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xix
Introduction	1
Purposes of this Book	2
Literacy Desiring	4
Why Not Sociocultural and/or New Literacy Studies Perspectives?	6
Literacy Desiring: Shifting to an Ethico-Onto-Epistemological Perspective	15
Writing with Theories	17
Overview of Book Chapters	19
1. Paradigmatic and Pedagogical Shifts: Literacy Desiring	22
Poststructural and Posthumanist (Re)presentation of Riley/Frog	22
Poststructural and Posthumanist Theories: Paradigmatic Shifts	26
Enchantment with Possibilities and Potentialities: “Explod[ing] the Entire Educational System”	30
2. Poststructural and Posthumanist Theories: What Do They Produce in Writers’ Studio?	32
Poststructural Ideas	32
Posthumanist Ideas	39
Theory ↔ Methodology ↔ Pedagogy	47
3. Living Out Theories as Pedagogy: Teaching ↔ Learning in Room 203	53
Flattening Room 203	54
Space	55
Time	60
Materials	62
Language	65
Trust and Permission	67

4. Intra-active Writing With/Through Daily News	69
Elza and Raisa: Body Survey of Ice Cream Flavors	71
Joe and Bethany: Football Web	75
Nick: Scavenger Hunt Mystery	80
What Did Daily News Produce?	83
5. Nonfiction Writing and Animal Research	85
Nonfiction Land of Room 203: A Game	86
Bye Bye Birdies Game: Research About the Not So Friendly Relationship Between Cats and Birds	88
How-to Video: Making Seasonal Snowflakes	97
How-to Videos: Making Recipes	104
What Did Nonfiction Writing and Animal Research Produce?	108
6. Personal Narratives and Writing for Personal Interests	111
What Writing Cycle?	113
Personal Narratives and Rhizomatic Writing Processes	125
What Did Personal Narrative and Writing for Personal Interests Produce?	142
7. Fiction and Series Writing	145
Gigi	145
21 Minus 1 Days Earlier from Gigi's Night Writing	147
Three Perspectives	149
What Did Fiction and Series Writing Produce?	155
8. Underneath the Large Noisy Events: The Absent Presence Writing	160
Plastic Cube Cities, All Over Floor	161
Paper Airplane Tournament	166
Tree Markings: Somebody Is Coming!	172
Skateboard Park with Paper Skateboards	177
Naming the School Hallways: "To Make a Creative Difference"	184
What Did Absent Presence Writing, Underneath the Large Noisy Events, Produce?	187
9. Planning in Order to Be Flexible: Creating Spaces for Literacy Desiring	192
End of the School Year, May, a Conference with Neil During Writers' Studio	192
Literacy Desiring: But What About Standards?	194

Emergent Listening: Being and Becoming with Children/Materials/Time/Space	196
Constituting Habits: Emergent Becomings of Tara and Candace	198
Ethico-Onto-Epistemology	203
Becoming Anew	204
Appendix: Illustrative Examples of Poststructural and Posthumanist Concepts	205
References	207
About the Authors	214

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Preface

As a researcher you have no inherent right to know better than teachers their own problems and questions, but at the same time teachers might benefit from the encounter with researchers. (Olsson, 2009, p. 103)

As a university-affiliated researcher, coming into Tara's classroom, Candace was aware of power dynamics and how she hoped our relationship would unfold. Candace's educational experiences, including courses on feminist methodologies, action research, and narrative inquiry, framed how she talked to Tara about a possible teacher/researcher collaboration. As the above quote by Olsson eloquently says, as a researcher, Candace has no inherent right to know Tara's problems and questions better than Tara does. However, Candace did believe that the two of us, along with the students, could together create new ideas while teaching/researching/learning together. Candace believes strongly in the ethics of researching *with* teachers and students, not *on* them. So on the days Candace was in Tara's room, it was her responsibility to actively engage in learning with Tara and students. We did not go into our research partnership with a predetermined research question. It was in the moment of life unfolding in the classroom, each school year, that we were intrigued by *literacy desirings*, and therefore we had to follow and learn from/with them. *Literacy desiring*, as we describe in more detail later, is a focus on literacy processes—the *becoming* of artifacts such as books, movies, dramas, three-dimensional (3-D) models, wall murals, puppets, and so forth. Literacy desiring emphasizes the fluid, sometimes unintentional, unbounded, and rhizomatic ways multimodal artifacts come into being through intra-actions with humans and nonhumans such as time, space, materials, and the environment.

OUR BACKSTORY AND NOTICINGS FROM ROOM 203

We began our collaboration in 2010, jointly interested in opening up spaces for student inquiries and expanding the current Writing Workshop practices in Tara's 1st- and 2nd-grade classes. Tara's midwestern, university-town classroom was composed of an average of 24 students. The students

represented diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, with several speaking languages other than English at home. The children came from homes of university faculty members, business owners, construction workers, doctors, and retail employees, essentially a diverse range of income levels. Typically students engaged in Writing Workshop (which became Writers' Studio) each day for about one hour in addition to large blocks of time during the day for reading-to-self and buddy reading (while Tara taught through guided reading and book club groups); an inquiry time for student-centered inquiries, science, and social studies; read-alouds; shared reading and writing experiences; and a math workshop.

As we began our venture, we were intimately familiar with a range of literature on teaching writing, specifically in early childhood (Bomer, 2010; Calkins, 1994; Calkins, Hartman, & White, 2005; Corgill, 2008; Dyson, 1993; Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001; Heard & McDonough, 2009; Hindley, 1996; Horn & Giacobbe, 2007; Ray, 2010; Ray & Cleaveland, 2004; Ray & Glover, 2008; Turbill & Bean, 2006). Many of the instructional materials we read discussed units of study and/or the writing cycle in a way that painted a picture of writing as a linear process (i.e., steps of brainstorming, drafting, revising and editing, and publishing), often within a particular genre or focused topic of study (e.g., Calkins, 2003; Developmental Studies Center, 2007). Through our collaborative research, we came to believe that offering children lined or blank paper to “make books” and even having children collect ideas in a Writers' Notebook were limiting (Gutshall & Kuby, 2013; Kuby, 2017; Kuby & Gutshall Rucker, 2015). These methods still constrained writing to 2-D (two-dimensional) alphabetic print and drawings. Also, we inferred that many of these professional resources focused on the individual writing of specific children rather than collaborative visions and partnerships. Even books on the social aspects of writing, such as Dyson (1993), focused on children talking or having peer conferences while writing, but still producing individual products. These teaching materials didn't seem to fully capture the multimodal and collaborative ways of writing that characterized Tara's classroom.

We began to expand our readings to include texts on multimodality and/or multiliteracies (Kress, 1997; Larson & Marsh, 2005; Marsh, 2005; New London Group, 1996; Pahl & Rowsell, 2010, 2012; Wohlwend, 2011, 2013). While these readings did prompt us to begin shifting our practices in some areas, such as setting out a range of supplies (e.g., paint, tissue paper, pipe cleaners, stencils, iPads, colored paper, and so forth) for writing, we still struggled. We wanted to follow children's *desiring-with-materials*, even if their ideas for a possible end product were unclear to us. The challenge was to create curriculum with children that encouraged them to compose with a range of materials and for Tara to feel comfortable articulating how these projects supported curriculum standards. As discussed further in the

book, especially the final chapter, we were aware of district expectations for curricular standards and Tara was cognizant of these as she planned.

As in many other districts, Tara experienced several changes in administration both at the school and the district level since we began to work together in 2010. However, with these transitions, Tara has maintained a positive and professional relationship with the principals. It was Tara's understanding that she was to use the various curricular materials and resources as a guide for planning. Even with these adopted programs, Tara consulted the district's standards (such as the state's grade-level expectations and, now, the Common Core State Standards) when making decisions in her classroom. However, incorporating a multimodal approach wasn't enough—or intentionally adding materials wasn't enough. Time, space, and matter—the entanglement of these—along with trust and permission kept surfacing in our conversations together. We needed different theoretical ideas to help us analyze and think about the knowing/being/doing of writing in Room 203.

Disclaimers

Before moving forward, we have a few disclaimers. Some of the projects didn't seem to go anywhere, at least as far as we could tell, yet the children were exploring their inquiries-with-materials and thinking of larger possibilities for people to *use* their artifacts, although this goal wasn't always a driving force. We see literacy desiring, an idea we conceptualized to describe the literacy practices in Tara's room, as different from progressive, generative, negotiated, inquiry-based, and student-centered curricula. All of these terms, we believe, point to following a student's inquiry, often through an inquiry cycle, where there is a clear end goal in mind—to answer a specific question. These approaches are all product centered. And the focus is on knowledge production by humans, for humans. However, literacy desiring is about the present, in-the-moment *intra-actions* (mutually constitutive relationship between humans and nonhumans), often without a clear question, inquiry, or end goal in mind (see the introduction and Chapter 1 for discussions on literacy desiring). An important aspect of literacy desiring is that sometimes intra-actions are directed by the object rather than the human in the sense that sometimes materials “speak” back to students in ways they don't expect (e.g., tape sticks or twists in a way students don't intend; paper will not stand vertically even with multiple attempts and supports).

The projects in this book were not extras or side things done under the radar in free time; rather, *the projects shared became the curriculum*. Tara followed student/materials desirings, and even when she didn't know where they might lead, she trusted the children. Tara knew the learning expectations of her school district and the culture of her school and community

well, which allowed her to be open to and follow desirings. She was able to navigate the politics and power dynamics in savvy, smart ways. Even within an often rigid, structured, and striated school environment, Tara aimed to create open, porous, fluid, and smooth spaces for children to be literacy creators, users, and learners.

However, creating these smooth spaces for children did not come without tensions for either of us. We both struggled as we witnessed children-creating-with-materials, asking ourselves: What do we say as they make game boards, wall murals, and 3-D models? When do we insert ourselves and when do we step back to watch? We questioned what might happen if the principal came into the classroom when children were using papier mâché to create large eggs or dancing jigs wearing Robin Hood hats made of paper. We asked ourselves whether we should suggest materials and formats of composing or wait for children to invent-with-materials. How do we communicate with families about the learning in Room 203?

Early childhood educator Gail Boldt (2009) asserts that children's writing visions can be stifled by a teacher's insistence for certain revisions and end products, as students might "assume a position of compliance" when a teacher uses a piece of student writing to shape the student into a "certain kind of writer" (p. 11). Boldt reminds us to watch and listen closely to desirings. However, this isn't as easy as it sounds. We struggled to follow the fluid, unpredictable nature of desirings and not co-opt them with our own agendas. We often discussed these issues and asked: How do we have conferences with children who are making games or how-to videos? What happens (what is produced) when Tara doesn't tell children "no" when they create paper airplanes, cut out snowflakes, or want to make plastic bracelets on Rainbow Looms? What if we stood back and watched as literacy desirings unfolded with materials even when children seemed only to be using pipe cleaners as swords or to be using hole punchers to create a collective of little dots? What if we asked students to tell us about how they were being literacy learners and writers with these materials? What if we asked them to tell us how the materials spoke to them? Could these intra-actions with materials be literacy learning?

Social, Collaborative Aspects of Writers' Studio

Ultimately we came to believe that adding a variety of tools and materials wasn't enough for multimodal literacy teaching and learning. We had to embrace a philosophical change in our pedagogical beliefs (or perhaps lean into beliefs already within us). We noticed how children, without instruction or prompting from Tara, collaborated. Something was happening socially that we didn't see in professional scholarship on teaching young writers. Dyson's (1993) and others' scholarship (Burns, 2001; Rowe, 2008;

Spigelman, 2000) focuses on children authoring their own writing while talking to peers; this scholarship usually emphasizes an end product. Other researchers have recognized the importance of children working alongside one another while writing (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001; Ray & Cleveland, 2004). Some scholars have examined collaboration among students, discussing their individual writing projects (Dyson, 1989a, 1989b; Rowe, 2008; Spigelman, 2000). We agree with Husbye, Buchholz, Coggin, Powell, and Wohlwend (2012) when they state, “Over the past 30 years, a variety of writing paradigms have been implemented in primary classrooms; however, even process-oriented paradigms have predominantly positioned children as independent authors expected to represent their unique voices on paper” (p. 84).

Recently scholars have begun to think about the social aspects of creating multimodal texts, especially with filmmaking and drama. Lysaker, Wheat, and Benson (2010) emphasize the ways children can inform the process as they have the capacity to reshape Writing Workshop by working to “broaden the notion of authoring . . . [which] include[s] playful interactions, imaginative talk, and pretend play. In this way . . . [children redefine] the ways in which one can be a writer” (p. 225). Wohlwend (2011, 2013) advocates play as literacy and provides examples of how literacy is inherently multimodal and social. However, little attention in scholarship is given to the *processes* of students cocreating the same multimodal artifacts. This book aims to fill that gap and focuses on the processes of children-cocreating-with-materials as writers. While talking with peers about writing is a part of the Writing Workshop model, the students are still held accountable for publishing their own writing (often 2-D, alphabetic texts). Even though students may have a peer edit or contribute ideas to help with revisions, ultimately the piece of writing is owned by one student and that student is responsible for the final product. These final products often are produced for the teacher’s assessment and/or to be read aloud to peers in an author’s-chair format to receive “pluses and wishes” (i.e., compliments and areas for growth). We noticed that children in Room 203 often collaboratively produced artifacts for *others to use*. Students made games for others to play, bracelets for others to wear, how-to videos for others to learn from, and book toys for others to enjoy while reading a book.

FINDING POSTSTRUCTURAL AND POSTHUMANIST THEORIES

In our journey we also noticed that something was happening with materials, time, and space in Room 203. In our research, students folded a piece of paper and it became a Robin Hood hat, they folded another paper and it became the feather, and they folded other papers to create bows, arrows,

tails, and ears. It appears students did not always know ahead of intra-acting with materials what the materials would become—they weren't always intentional in the ways Kress (1997) describes young children as writers. Creations happened in the moment, in unexpected ways, with peers and materials. The students shifted away from traditional 2-D writing, running out ahead of us as they engaged in the social processes of multimodal producing, making their own spaces to intra-act, become, and cocreate in unexpected ways. These projects and literacy events in Tara's classroom were fascinating to us, and we found ourselves needing more theoretical ideas to think about time, space, materials, and people during Writing Workshop.

Candace had some experience reading poststructural theories, specifically Deleuze and Guattari's writing, and shared them with Tara. This was our starting place. We find the metaphor of the rhizome that Deleuze and Guattari (1987) discuss to be a useful tool to understand literacy desiring. A rhizome is a tuber, root-like structure that flourishes in various, unexpected directions. Rhizomes focus on processes, unexpected departures from the norm, and assemblages/fluid social networks. However, our initial readings of poststructural theory led us to believe that it doesn't speak to the intra-active nature of humans and materials. Therefore, we found we needed to merge theories together in order to better understand the literacy desiring(s) of children-with-materials. We also acknowledge that some scholars are now reading Deleuze and Guattari's writings, especially those on the rhizome, as posthumanist. Some scholars, at least initially, labeled Deleuze and Guattari as poststructuralist—ourselves included. However, scholars are reentering Deleuze and Guattari's writings and reading concepts, such as assemblages of desire and rhizomes, as posthumanist. Not all scholars draw a line between poststructural and posthumanist theories, but some scholars do. We often use the phrase “poststructural and posthumanist theories” in this book, as this was our way into these concepts. As St. Pierre (2004) reminds us, we each have our own Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari, Barad, and so forth, because we each interpret, read, and construct writings based on our own desires and experiences. In this spirit, we are merging aspects of what we understand as poststructural and posthumanist theories to make new, to become, to desire, to imagine other possibilities of literacy education.

We align with Dahlberg and Moss (2009), who state that educators need to offer “alternative narratives that demonstrate the multiplicity of theories and perspectives that are not just being written about, but are also being put to work in everyday practice” (p. xiii). We believe children and teachers, like the ones in Room 203, are already living out poststructural and posthumanist ideas although they are not embraced in schools. We need to invite students (and ourselves) to do the same and give them (us) the time, space, materials, and permission to do so. The aim, then, is for educators

to direct attention to children's processes rather than focusing on judging a final product.

We were initially unsure about how to proceed with living out post-structural and posthumanist concepts in schools but found real value—intellectual and relational value—in imagining how these ideas get lived out in literacy teaching and learning. We found that while the system of schooling is itself constraining, the ways literacy educators traditionally have conceptualized literacy and literate practices in literacy education also were constraining. We, too, needed permission to live out poststructural and posthumanist ideas as literacy researchers/teachers. However, unbounded ways of doing literacy (as a researcher/teacher/child) aren't fully embraced by the larger educational community. Boldt (2009) writes:

Space for young children to use materials, social relations, and time in the classroom for anything other than predetermined academic outcomes—in other words, the time to play-with ideas, materials, and one another—has largely disappeared in today's classroom. (p. 12)

We believe, sadly, that curricular space *still* has not allowed children to flourish in playing-with-materials and desiring as literacy learners. We aren't saying that 2-D alphabetic writing can't be literacy desiring or that just because children use 3-D materials they are desiring. While materials are a key part in embracing literacy desiring and in shifting Tara's teaching, the change is fundamentally about a philosophical shift in knowing/being/doing literacy and how that gets lived out pedagogically in the classroom. The social-discursive-playing-with-materials mattered for writers in Tara's classroom. We must allow children to chase their ideas and use materials to communicate in ways that make sense to them.