

# LITERACY THEORY AS PRACTICE

CONNECTING THEORY AND  
INSTRUCTION IN K-12 CLASSROOMS

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Foreword by Annemarie Sullivan Palincsar



*For Granny, a.k.a. Pearl Louise Hunter Weber (1878–1975)*

*“All knowledge, all thinking really worthy of the name, ends in reaction, implicit or explicit. Only so can knowledge be power. Knowledge that is all ready to eventuate in reaction is power-ful but it is not yet power. It comes to the same thing to say that the final stage in any complete act of knowledge is application, which is the true climax of intellect.” (Weber, 1922, para. 2)*

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## Introduction

I would like this book to be read as an homage to classroom practice—the messy, difficult, artful, and concrete work of teachers. This is no simple task, however, given that the notion of theory in the popular imagination, and particularly in the educational community, rarely evokes images of real everyday practice. On the contrary, theories are more often viewed as things akin to museum artifacts—on display and decontextualized from the everyday practices and phenomena from which they were derived. In her poem *To Be of Use*, Marge Piercy (1982) writes in a similar way about cultural artifacts such as Hopi vases and Greek amphoras. While they may sit on display in museums, “you know they were made to be used” (p. 106). Indeed, theories are also made to be used. They may be used to inform or understand practice, but they are also meant to be practiced themselves and oftentimes reshaped in the process to better suit the contingencies of real students, real classrooms, and everyday classroom life.

The purpose of this book is to introduce readers to an array of salient, influential, and potentially influential theories of reading and literacy and to illuminate and invite connections between these theories and classroom practices. In the process, I hope to resituate theory as a part of everyday practice. Like teaching, theory is made to be used and is worth doing well. This is particularly relevant for today’s political context, which is largely demarcated by standardizing curricular policies and increasing scrutiny over teachers’ expertise. While this is not a simple problem, the practice of theory and the theorization of practice create frameworks for communicating why students and teachers do what they do in the classroom, how they might do things differently, and how teachers might adjust their theories along the way.

### CONCEPTUALIZING THEORY

The term *theory* is operationalized in myriad ways, which complicates adherence to any one definition. Most people, for example, are familiar with the theory of evolution or have heard of theoretical physics. These uses of the term invoke particular scientific theories, which represent the most

likely explanations for natural phenomena and become the subjects of experiments designed to test for falsification. Yet, in our everyday lives, we often use the term *theory* to refer to abstractions or ideal (rather than practical) circumstances or situations rather than how things actually are. For example, a friend of mine who is a teacher once remarked in frustration, “In theory I’m a professional, but I rarely get to decide what or how I teach!”

In education, theory evades easy definition. Its uses range from the colloquial, as in my friend’s comment, to explicit references to theories of teaching and learning, such as when a teacher states that she uses “a constructivist approach to teaching math, grounding instruction in inquiry and the use of manipulatives.” And sometimes teachers use theory to articulate their thinking regarding why students behave in particular ways and what they might do about it. Consider the following conversation in the staff room at an elementary school:

*Amy:* I heard Bryson got in trouble earlier this morning. What happened?

*Collette:* You know, this has been happening during independent reading. He reads, or maybe just looks at his books for a little while, but then he’s flicking his pencil around, poking another kid, or getting up and talking to his friends. It’s wearing me down.

*Amy:* Why do you think it’s happening?

*Collette:* I don’t know, but I’m thinking it might be because he’s not finding books that are engaging and easy enough for him to read by himself. I know he’s nuts about NASCAR, so maybe tomorrow I’ll bring in some of my son’s NASCAR books. He has some that are at different levels. We’ll see.

*Amy:* Well, let me know what happens. I have a couple of kids doing the same thing.

This is a process of inquiry in which two teachers identify a problem, theorize about its cause, and articulate a plan for testing the theory. Teachers engage in this kind of inquiry multiple times a day as they come to know their students and craft instruction based on their students’ strengths and needs.

In addition to variations in everyday applications of theory in education, its use among literacy researchers has changed over the past several decades. Dressman (2007), for example, explains how uses of theory in literacy research reports have shifted from specific propositions about phenomena to be tested empirically and quantifiably (e.g., experimental studies testing Kintsch’s 2013 construction–integration model of reading comprehension), to framings, or sets of assumptions, to inform research and practice (e.g., using transactional/reader response theory as a framework for designing a study about an afterschool book club for young adolescents). This shift

means that scholars who frame their research according to different theories may talk about and use theory quite differently from one another.

My own understanding of theory, and the one operationalized in this book, is similar to that of Unrau and Alvermann (2013): “Theories are propositional networks commonly used to help members of a community of researchers and practitioners understand, explain, and make predictions about key concepts and processes in a particular field of study” (p. 49). From this angle, theories have both explanatory and predictive value for phenomena and practice. This definition is also broad enough to include the different uses of the term identified above. Importantly, however, theories are not neutral or devoid of ideology. Rather, they involve “pragmatic commitments” that ground our approaches to everyday problems and events (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 15). These pragmatic commitments include assumptions regarding what counts as learning and what counts as “literacy”; where learning and literacy occur (e.g., in the head or in dialogue with others); how we determine whether progress in learning is occurring and how learning and literacy are measured; and where to look when we believe learning is not occurring to a desired degree.

And yet, we do not always make our theoretical grounding explicit. Collette’s ideas regarding her student’s behavior reveal tacit assumptions about the interrelationship between engagement, reading development, social behavior, and the teacher’s role in that relationship—assumptions that are not shared by all. And these assumptions matter not just for the sake of knowledge (knowing the foundations of our practices or how our practices invigorate or animate particular theories) but also because considering the assumptions that anchor our practices can support efforts to map out new practices for the benefit of our students.

Moreover, how we understand what is happening in any given instance of practice (how a reader makes sense of a given text) or set of practices (how a teacher guides middle school students in selecting books for independent reading) also depends on what we consider to be the phenomena of interest within those practices. In the case of how a reader makes sense of text, the phenomenon of interest could be how the student draws on her first language as she decodes text in her second or third language. Alternatively, it could be how she positions herself as a particular kind of reader among her peers when she argues for her interpretations of a text. What we deem to be important, indeed what we are even *able* to see, can depend on our theoretical lens. If you view reading as a process of decoding, then you will likely attend to students’ strategies for identifying unknown words in a text, but you may be less likely to notice how students use their peer-group status to get their opinions heard during read-aloud time.

With these understandings in mind, to talk about theory without considering practice would not make sense. Like many museum artifacts—everyday objects such as cooking pots and arrowheads that have been

exhumed from the earth—theory does not exist for itself or solely for the admiration of those who generate it. Theories are made to be used. To be sure, theory is not only practiced but *requires* practice to live and thrive. Similarly, practice does not exist in a vacuum, and so it is never devoid of theory. My practice of asking students to engage in conversations about texts to generate interpretations animates my theoretical assumption that meaning is socially mediated and constructed. The texts and assessments we use, the tasks we ask students to complete, and the kinds of questions we ask all privilege, negate, reflect, and animate different theories of literacy, teaching, and learning. And because different theories and practices attend in different ways to the strengths and needs of diverse students, our pedagogical choices are tied up with issues of power and equity, including whose ideas are heard, whose languages are valued, and so on.

Some literacy educators refer to the connection between theory and practice as *praxis*, a reciprocal relationship between practice and reflection (Freire, 1970; Morrell, 2008). Likewise, theory undergirds policies that impact literacy instruction, although, as with practice and theory, the theoretical assumptions guiding policy are seldom made explicit. Such policies may include national or statewide initiatives or legislation, such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) or Reading First, or more locally generated policies (e.g., a district's decision to block particular websites in schools). While I do not focus on policy, it surely impacts the curricula and instructional practices highlighted in this book, and so I remark on policy where relevant.

Despite the interdependence of theory and practice, popular discourse in education often sets theory apart from practice. What is more, theories themselves may be viewed in isolation from one another. Why is this? Perhaps there is some value in distilling an idea or a theory into something self-contained, tidy, and conceptually manageable. For people relatively new to thinking about theory, constructing such conceptual boundaries may ease the learning process, facilitating differentiation between multiple ways of understanding the practice and teaching of reading and literacy. And the false dichotomy between theory and practice likely makes ideas about teaching and learning easier to package and market to a broad audience in the form of professional texts or curricula. Here we might point toward the “methods fetish” in education—the valuing and privileging of practice over reflection and analysis, or praxis.

Despite the conceptual, political, and economic benefits of compartmentalizing theory and practice, it is not all that helpful for moving the field forward. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) criticized the tendency of researchers to adhere to particular theories because of their eloquence and tidiness, but abstracting them from the processes they were meant to explain. He called this the “scholastic point of view,” which is unresponsive to the messiness of everyday practice. To treat theory as separate from practice is to objectify it and place it on a shelf, where it exists

to be admired but never touched. In this book I try to dismantle this artificial theory–practice divide. I invite readers to *touch* and *play with* theory.

### SITUATING PRAXIS WITHIN A CONCEPTUAL CONTINUUM

In framing different theoretical influences on methods of literacy research, Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) distinguish between strategies, models, theories, and epistemologies. Here I adapt their continuum to map out relationships between theories of reading and literacy and classroom practices. At the most concrete level are *instructional strategies*—pedagogical techniques to engage students, develop key understandings, initiate thoughtful discussions about texts, create and maintain classroom order, assess students' progress, and so forth. Instructional strategies are often of primary concern to teachers seeking specific ideas for classroom engagements (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005) and imply or call forth material tools and resources. For example, shared writing may require a Smartboard or an easel with chart paper and pens. Teachers may feel constrained by the tools and resources available to them and therefore may shy away from particular strategies or adjust them accordingly (e.g., rearrange furniture or work in small groups instead of independently because only eight laptops have been fully charged).

*Curricular models* are less specific than strategies. While the terms *theory* and *model* are often used interchangeably, they indicate different levels of abstraction, with models referring to more concrete representations of processes or practices (Alvermann, Unrau, & Ruddell, 2013). In general, models can be understood as social or scientific representations of phenomena that reflect theories, or that inform how practices might be carried out, and often appear as visual representations (e.g., a drawing or a 3-D model of a solar system). However, it can be helpful to distinguish between theoretical models (representations of theories, such as a diagram representing the storage of short- and long-term memory in the brain) and curricular models (e.g., reading workshop, which may include various instructional configurations). While the former is meant to represent a phenomenon as explained by a theory, curricular models represent potential practices as informed by a theory. Curricular models are often presented as steps or guidelines, or even as rigid templates for teaching, and are often the focal point of specific policies and initiatives. However, in everyday practice, educators typically adapt curricular models and their associated instructional strategies to suit their professional context and students. In this sense, they can be thought of more as guides or tools than tidy representations of reality (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005).

A *theory* is more abstract than a model and attempts to explain or predict phenomena in the world. Some readers may be familiar with well-known and influential theories of reading and literacy, such as schema theory, transactional/reader response theory, or critical literacy theory. Terms