

Literacy Online

*New Tools for
Struggling Readers
and Writers*



Julie M. Wood

Foreword by
VICTORIA PURCELL-GATES

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FOREWORD

This is a timely and important book for teachers and for teacher educators. In an era of multiliteracies, on-line reading and writing is finally taking its rightful place on center stage, along with paper-based literacies and media literacies. Locating on-line literacies within the discourse of reading and writing development, as Julie Wood has done, makes this text of special importance to teachers. Yes, reading and writing development do occur in the process of reading and writing on-line, just as well, if not more effectively, as with paper-based texts. This book offers research and theory to support this claim. More importantly, though, it offers teachers many rich examples of on-line learning along with a multitude of suggestions and resources.

The content of this book must be understood within the context of the literacy instructional theory and practice within which many of the principles and experiences, related in the book, were developed. Without this context, one could conclude that Chall's Stages of Reading Development lead naturally to the authentic online reading and writing activities Wood advocates for. With this context provided, readers can fill in the historical and pedagogical gaps that link Chall's important foundational work and Wood's online literacy theory and practice.

READING BECOMES LITERACY

Wood describes a year in the life of the Harvard Literacy Lab, during which she conducted her research on which this book is based. The name—*Literacy Lab*—was assumed in 1992 as a change from the original—*Reading Lab*. This name change was not a trivial matter and, in many ways, signifies the theoretical and pedagogical changes that had, and were, occurring in the field of literacy instruction. I had assumed the directorship of the Harvard Reading Lab in 1991, upon the retirement of Dr. Chall, its founder. Part of my charge was to transform the Reading Lab in ways that reflected current research and theory in the field. While numerous curricular changes were conceived and implemented by me and other literacy faculty at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the course that connected graduate students to the Lab as teachers and the pedagogy instantiated in the Lab underwent significant changes.

As the term *literacy* reflects, *writing* development became as much of a focus for assessment and instruction as *reading* development. This move reflected current theory and practice that saw the development of writing skills and attitude as crucial and previously unattended to by schools and teachers, relative to the attention given to reading. Much research was occurring on the development of writing ability at the time, and many publications were available for teachers, often written by teachers. In addition, current research was providing deeper insights into the reading/writing connections than ever before. As teachers, we could see more clearly how learning to write helped one learn to read and vice versa. By renaming the Reading Lab as the Literacy Lab, we could publicly assume this writing/reading stance as well as more accurately label the diagnostic and instructional activities that were conducted therein.

Beyond this shift to include writing into the pedagogy of the Lab, though, the assumption of the term *literacy* also reflected a deep theoretical shift in the field. *Literacy*, as a label for a field of research and practice, encompasses a broader field than does *Reading*, or even *Reading/Writing*. The term *literacy* denotes a language practice that is cultural, social, cognitive, historically constructed, and ultimately defined by relationships of power. Thus, the "field of literacy" is informed by research and knowledge from such disciplines as psychology, linguistics, sociology, history, anthropology, and education. Course content for the graduate students who taught in the Harvard Literacy Lab reflected this breadth of knowledge. Upon vote of the faculty, the *Harvard Reading Lab* became the *Harvard Literacy Lab*.

As you read in the coming chapters the many descriptions of the opportunities computers offer for engaging writing activities, my hope is that this brief history of the evolution of the Literacy Lab's name will enlighten and provide historical and theoretical context for these activities. Another pedagogical change, though, also contextualized Wood's Lab experience and research, and its import requires explanation.

AUTHENTIC READING AND WRITING

With this broader view of literacy came the notion of *authentic reading and writing*. The definition of authentic reading/writing was loose and fuzzy but the term was being used a lot during the 1990s and during my tenure as director of the Literacy Lab. At its core, the term meant reading or writing of "real" texts as contrasted with doing isolated skill work or skill work that involved "artificial" texts, constructed for the purpose of learning skills. The instructional approach I brought into the Literacy Lab was one I termed

Whole-Part-Whole. This looks very close to what is now referred to as Balanced Literacy Instruction. The essence of this approach is to teach skills in the context of authentic reading and writing.

With this instructional approach, I built on Chall's view that once children learned to decode, they need to read books a great deal to develop fluency and automaticity. I expanded and clarified this (again, reflecting much of the current research and practice at the time) to make authentic reading and writing a central part of all literacy instruction, including that directed toward beginning readers and writers. I also brought my definition of authentic reading and writing into the Lab.

At the time, this definition was not fully clarified to the degree that I could put it into definitional language, but I could describe it enough to ensure that my students learned to incorporate authentic literacy into their instruction of children. Since that time, I have conducted several large-scale research studies that have shown statistically significant outcomes of authentic literacy instruction for both adults and children.¹ In the process, a definition has emerged that allows one to assess a particular literacy instructional activity and judge the degree to which it is authentic.

We conceptualize authentic literacy events as those that replicate or reflect reading and writing events that occur in the world outside of a schooling context. An authentic literacy event is, thus, a communicative event and as such involves two interlocutors—each event has a writer and a reader or a reader of a writer. To judge the authenticity of a literacy event, we look at two dimensions of the event—*purpose/function* and *text*. Authentic *purpose or function* means that the literacy event serves a communicative purpose, like reading to answer questions or writing to provide information for someone who wants or needs it, in addition to learning particular skills or content. To be authentic, a *text* (written or read) must be like, or very much like, texts that are used by readers and writers outside of a learning to read or write context to serve communicative purposes or functions.

Authentic literacy events/activities, thus, involve students in reading or writing textual forms that occur in the lives of literate people for the purposes that literate people read and write them, *in addition to, or aside from,*

¹ Purcell-Gates, V., Degener, S., Jacobson, E., & Soler, M. (2002). Impact of authentic literacy instruction on adult literacy practices. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 37, 70–92. Also, Purcell-Gates, V., Duke, N.K., Hall, L., & Tower, C. (2003). *Explicit Explanation of Genre Within Authentic Literacy Activities in Science: Does it Facilitate Development and Achievement?* Paper presented at the 2003 National Reading Conference, Scottsdale, AZ.

learning to read and/or write. Those texts and reading/writing purposes that reflect primarily literacy learning purposes are counter posed to authentic texts and purposes, and we refer to these as *school-only* texts and purposes. Examples of *authentic texts/purposes* include reading a newspaper for information, writing a personal letter to a friend to maintain friendship and share personal information, reading a novel for relaxation and/or to discuss with a book group, writing an information book about Dolphins to include in the class library for others to read for information, or reading a health pamphlet to learn ways to protect one's health.

Examples of school-only textual forms and purposes include writing a list of words for a spelling test, reading a passage and answering comprehension questions, writing a report on worms to turn in to the teacher for a grade, reading a decodable text to practice just-learned phonics rules, and writing to fill in the blanks on a skill worksheet. At times, one finds authentic texts read for school-only purposes such as when students may be asked to read a newspaper story and find all of the long vowel words or to circle the compound sentences. As stated earlier, research is beginning to document the positive effect on development of involving children in authentic reading and writing in the process of literacy instruction.

AUTHENTIC LITERACY IN THE LITERACY LAB

You will find many examples throughout this book of ways to use technology to facilitate authentic reading and writing while at the same time helping children get a hold of the essential skills needed to learn to read and write. These include such activities as using digital photos to create photo journals to be read by others as part of phonics lessons, capturing Readers' Theatre readings on a camcorder for later showings to an audience, composing and sending emails around the world to new friends, online publishing of texts for others to read and enjoy or learn from, and many, many more. As first a Teaching Fellow and then a Director in the Harvard Literacy Lab, Julie Wood developed her ideas about the possibilities of the marriage of literacy learning and technology within an historically situated theoretical and pedagogical context. The conceptualization of literacy as more than reading and a growing awareness of the role of authentic reading/writing in successful literacy development were, in my opinion, critical to this context.

Victoria Purcell-Gates
Canada Research Chair of Early Childhood Literacy
University of British Columbia

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*I awoke this morning with devout thanksgiving for my friends,
the old and the new.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Today is Thanksgiving. It seems to me to be the perfect day to acknowledge all the people in my life who have helped me along the way as I've written this book. To each one of them, I am deeply thankful.

First there are the teachers, students, and parents who participated in the Literacy Lab the year I served as director. Each of you taught me more than I can say. And I can still picture each of you in my mind's eye—exactly the way you were that year. Special thanks to Nicole Jernée and Kristin Kellogg for documenting the work of two students, “Richard” and “Jackie,” respectively. They wrote with enthusiasm and were always there for me, ready to exchange ideas and help me get it right. I'm also in deep debt to our two outstanding Teaching Fellows, Julie Park and Natalie LaCroix White.

Then there are the talented wordsmiths who helped me conceptualize what I wanted to say and helped me say it better. My superb editor at Heinemann, Danny Miller, who was always there “in the ether,” even though he lives 3,000 miles away, and who has the patience of a saint; my colleague Ray Coutu, who critiqued my first book proposal over lunch in Harvard Square; stellar copy editor Carol Kort, who read early, *really* rough drafts without flinching—as did David Gordon of Harvard Education Press, each over several cups of coffee, which was important since much energy was required at that stage.

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Affectionate thanks to my family for enduring my writerly angst and encouraging me when I needed it most. I am indebted to you, Georgia Wood, Crispin Wood, Will Riddell, Justine Covault, and Rick, Maureen, Jessica, and Brielle Laffey. And at the very summit of the list is my husband, John A. Wood—muse, best friend, and, as it happens, the illustrator of this book.

Julie M. Wood
Cambridge, Massachusetts

A Thought on Gratitude

Let us be grateful to people who make us happy: They are the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom.

—Marcel Proust

BRAINSTORMING: CHANGING YOUR TEACHING FOREVER

Here are two worksheets for you and your colleagues to begin or extend the brainstorming phase of your literacy and technology plan. Part A can help you clarify your vision. Part B can help you outline a plan.

Part A: Fine-tune Your Vision

1. What do you have going for you right now (i.e., people and resources)?
 - A. *Personnel: Advocates and Angels* (e.g., technology coordinators, reading specialists, high-tech parent volunteers)

 - B. *Computers and other tools at your disposal* (e.g., digital cameras, digital camcorders, software)

 - C. *School structures that are already in place* (e.g., professional development events)

2. Wish list: What do you *really* need to achieve your technology and literacy goals?

Time (e.g., professional development workshops, time to collaborate, time to plan lessons?)

Equipment? (e.g., Zip™ drives, digital cameras, projection devices, software)

Technology support personnel? (Is there someone assigned to help you with day-to-day maintenance and glitches?)

Part B: Make It Happen

1. Who can you enlist to help you develop a plan for integrating new technologies into literacy instruction? (e.g., parents, high school students, media specialists)

2. What funding opportunities will you seek?
 - A. *Local businesses* (e.g., banks, high-tech companies)
 - B. *Grant writing opportunities* (local and government)

3. What is your overall plan? (*In the spirit of “getting digital,” you and your colleagues might enjoy using electronic resources to capture brainstorming sessions and record your plan. If so, see PBS’s TeacherLine, at teacherline.pbs.org, and take advantage of the feature called “My Portfolio.”*)

Sample Brainstorm: The Ease Into It Plan, School Year 20_____

SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER	JANUARY	FEBRUARY	MARCH	APRIL	MAY	JUNE
<i>Cross Thread Plan 1</i> Online writing portfolio	<i>Cross Thread Plan 2</i> Revamp classroom website								Culmination of all the cross thread projects
	<i>Special Project 1</i> Students create photo journals			<i>Special Project 2</i> Students write across the curriculum using a webQuest as a guide			<i>Special Project 3</i> Students develop their "voice" by writing to e-pals via email		
								<i>Showcase Event</i> Technology Open House for families and friends	

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Sample Brainstorm: The Turbo Plan, School Year 20____

SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER	JANUARY	FEBRUARY	MARCH	APRIL	MAY	JUNE
<i>Cross Thread Plan 1</i> Online writing portfolio	<i>Cross Thread Plan 2</i> Revamp classroom website	<i>Cross Thread Plan 3</i> Classroom newspaper						→	Culmination of all the cross thread projects
	<i>Special Project 1</i> Students create photo journals	→	<i>Special Project 2</i> Students learn to use word processors for writers' workshop	→	<i>Special Project 3</i> Students write across the curriculum using a WebQuest as a guide.	→	<i>Special Project 4</i> Students engage in peer review via the Internet	→	<i>Special Project 5</i> Students explore vocabulary websites and use new words in writing
		<i>Showcase Event 1</i> Technology Open House for family and friends				<i>Showcase Event 2</i> authors' night with students' original books			

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