TEACHER-CENTERED PROFESSIONALISM: A TEACHER READING GROUP AND NEW FORMS OF ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

by

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Abstract

This qualitative study of a teacher's reading group creates a case for teacher learning through increased access to knowledge and information made available through the Internet. This study is based on the experiences of six female teachers' participation in a reading group in a large urban centre in Western Canada. By analyzing the ways in which these particular teachers created a voluntary form of self-directed professional development, this study used a feminist framework to show that supported access to scholarly texts and information can contribute to a deeper understanding for teachers of the importance of the social practice of learning. By using online resources provided to them by the researcher, these teachers were able to take up issues related to their work through reflective practice and collective association with their professional learning community. The teachers generated new insights about the complexities of social inclusion within their schools, and they were motivated by the desire to better serve their students. One of the study's important findings concerns the kinds of knowledge that teachers chose to learn about. They pursued and discussed materials on the difficulty of bridging cultures with ESL students and their families, critiqued the need to challenge the influence of corporate discourse on schooling, and reframed the use of technologies in school. This study serves as a demonstration of how and why teachers may further engage in forms of self-directed professional development, especially in light of increasing access to online sources of research and scholarship on educational and education-related issues.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ......................................................................................................................... ii

List of Tables ................................................................................................................... vi

Dedication ......................................................................................................................... viii

Chapter 1 ......................................................................................................................... 1

Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 1

- My Journey As Teacher/Researcher ........................................................................... 1
- Statement of Intent .......................................................................................................... 2
- Significance of the Study ................................................................................................. 3
- Rationale .......................................................................................................................... 4
- Feminism and Research as Praxis ................................................................................... 4
- Researching New Approaches to ‘Women’s Ways of Knowing’ .................................... 5
- New Literacies and the Postmodern ............................................................................... 6
- Supported Access ............................................................................................................ 8
- Technology and Gender ................................................................................................ 10
- Context of the Study ....................................................................................................... 11

Chapter 2 ......................................................................................................................... 14

Reading and the Public Sphere: Teacher Learning and Communities of Practice .......... 14

- Reading in the Public Sphere ......................................................................................... 15
- Reader Response and Gendered Practices of Reading ..................................................... 16
- Reading ‘Woman’ ............................................................................................................. 17
- Reading as Social Transformation .................................................................................. 22
- A Feminist Pedagogy of Reading .................................................................................... 25
- Reading and Teacher Communities of Practice ............................................................ 26

Chapter 3 ......................................................................................................................... 28

Conceptual Design & Methodology .................................................................................. 28

- Purpose of the Study ....................................................................................................... 28
- New Landscapes of Feminism ......................................................................................... 28
- Reflexivity and Feminist Research ................................................................................... 29
- The Design ....................................................................................................................... 31
- The Research Questions ................................................................................................ 32
- Selection ........................................................................................................................... 32
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 4</th>
<th>The Discourse of Social Justice Within a Teacher Reading Group</th>
<th>.47</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Public Sphere</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Discourse of Political Action</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resisting the Corporate Discourse of Schooling</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schooling Sexualities</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading in the Public Sphere of Education</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5</td>
<td>Supported Access to Knowledge and Its Impact on Teacher Conversations</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Bridge Between Two Cultures</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mistakes that Inspire Learning</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Curriculum Development</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Hard Crossword Puzzle</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6</td>
<td>Situated Learning and Teachers’ Professional Knowledge Landscapes</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Knowledge Landscapes and Teacher Learning</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intertextualities</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading as Dialogue</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7</td>
<td>Discussion and Conclusion</td>
<td>.103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question #1</td>
<td>.103</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question #2</td>
<td>.106</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question #3</td>
<td>.108</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question #4</td>
<td>.111</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits</td>
<td>.115</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges of Supported Access</td>
<td>.116</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges of Feminist Research as Praxis</td>
<td>.118</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications</td>
<td>.119</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Learning in the Age of Information</td>
<td>.119</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Value of Supported Reading Environments</td>
<td>.120</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Tables

Table 3.1
Summary of Group Readings ................................................................. 43

Table 3.2
Summary of Teachers' Participation ....................................................... 45
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Dedication

This work is dedicated to the next generation of readers and writers, Reilly Twomey, Jillian Twomey, and Keara Twomey.
Chapter 1

Introduction

This chapter provides the context of this dissertation. I state the intent and outline concepts central to the design of the study; feminist research, new literacies, and situated learning. I share the significance and rationale for investigating how a teachers' reading group might act as a valuable form of professional learning.

My Journey As Teacher/Researcher

Within the small intimate space of my office where I was a teacher/counselor for fifteen years, I was privy to numerous stories about the good and bad experiences of schooling. I came to better understand the struggle that many teachers faced in the grueling pace and political climate of neo-conservative reforms in public education throughout my teaching career in Canada, particularly during the 1990's.

During this time the Progressive Conservatives were elected on a platform called the “Common Sense Revolution” in Ontario in 1995 under the leadership of Mike Harris. This was the beginning of a massive restructuring to Ontario’s public sector. During Harris’ first year as premier, welfare rates were cut by 21.6 per cent, Ministry of Health budget was cut by $1.5 billion (p. 22), and grants to school boards were “cut by $1 billion dollars over a full year” (Dare, 1997, pp. 21-22).

Not only was less money available for educational services, but new legislative changes had a devastating impact on the teachers and students that I worked with everyday. For example, in 1996, Bill 34, made junior kindergarten an optional program, cut funding to adult education programs, and removed statutory entitlement to sick days for teachers. A new secondary school curriculum reform came into effect in September of 1999 that introduced a standardized literacy
test in Grade 10 and reduced requirements for graduation. Bill 160, The Education Quality Improvement Act, stripped teachers of their statutory contract rights. Teachers across the province walked out of their schools and stayed off the job for two weeks as a form of political protest to these legislative changes to education in Ontario.

In response to the struggle to find a sense empowerment amidst these changes to education, a small group of female friends and I began reading articles about how to address the social problems of our schools. We were concerned about what it meant to create a safe school environment for our students and teacher colleagues. These informal meetings in which we shared readings and ideas became a form of professional learning community that represented what was important to us, providing a much needed re-energizing in the often exhausting work of teaching at an inner-city school in southeastern Ontario.

In many ways this experience of reading as a form of social and political participation propelled me back into the academy as way to further my understanding of what it meant to stay intellectually curious and passionate about teaching. As a teacher/researcher I became more and more excited about the relationship between teacher learning, teacher effectiveness, and the transformative potential of feminist research in education.

Statement of Intent

This study investigates the potential of a teacher’s reading group, made up of six female educators from a large urban centre in Western Canada, as a voluntary form of professional development. I will ask how reading environments might create intellectual engagement and transformative possibilities within their communities of practice.

I use the term communities of practice to frame this study’s use of teacher participation as a form of situated learning and professional development (Wenger, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991).
Situated within a larger study committed to improving public and professional access to knowledge (Willinsky, 2006), this study focuses on a form of supported access to educational research through the Internet, and how such access, if at all, contributed to the experience of the six female teachers involved in this study.

I use the term supported access broadly in this thesis in reference to my role in providing teachers with access to relevant digital and print research in their field, along with supporting materials that provided context and background information through related materials in the media, government data bases, and other sources. This was intended to provide insight into the new ways of structuring on-line access to research that are under development by the Public Knowledge Project and other entities (Willinsky, 2006 [referring to Access Principle]).

Significance of the Study

- This study deepens our understanding of how the reading of educational research might be utilized as a model of professional development within teachers' communities of practice.
- This study furthers understanding of how a form of supported access to feminist research and scholarship through information technologies contributes to the reading, reflection, and experience of female teachers within their communities of practice.
- This study asks how supported access to information through the Internet can further our understanding about how reading environments might be designed to provide readers meaningful engagement with scholarly research:
  - For designing and implementing practices for teacher professional development.
  - For nurturing teacher learning and knowledge through a form of supported access to scholarly research.
• For teacher participation in curriculum design and creative classroom practices.

• This study offers a contemporary understanding of feminist research as praxis in education.

Rationale

Feminism and Research as Praxis

For feminists, researching women's lives has always been political work. Feminist approaches to research aim to challenge what counts as legitimate knowledge, to disrupt dominant, masculinist narratives, and to find new ways of interpreting women's experience. Even though women seem to have achieved equality in many areas, I suggest that the feminist movement needs to examine how feminist theorizing can revitalize continuing efforts to achieve "more substantial equality for women and a more just arrangement of social and political institutions" (Butler, 2005, p. 174). This dissertation's investigation of a female teachers' reading group acknowledges the importance of exploring how the embodied female subject interprets scholarly texts as a point of praxis and new possibilities for learning and acting in the world of public education.

I want to distinguish clearly the conceptualization of feminism as a social and political movement and my use of a feminist methodology in this study. The landscape of feminism has changed primarily in that there are distinctive social movements that find commonality within categories of identity politics and social issues: anti-racist feminists, disability rights feminists, Marxist feminists, liberal feminists, black feminists, and white feminists are some examples. Inherent in all of these movements and political work is the understanding of the strategic need to essentialize gender as a political practice and as a way to speak for the material reality of women's lives.
Researching New Approaches to ‘Women’s Ways of Knowing’

Feminist psychologists in the 1980’s began to research the uniqueness of women’s experience within a development model of self. They postulated that developmental theory had been established by men’s experience and as a result often led to the “detriment or misreading of women” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986, p. 7). Belenky et al. established a serious of epistemological perspectives to situate how voices might be represented in the practices of learning and knowledge construction. A feminist epistemology values constructed knowledge: “a position in which women view all knowledge as contextual, experience themselves as creators of knowledge, and value both subjective and objective strategies for knowing” (p. 15). In context of this thesis, studying the reading experience of six teachers within a feminist epistemological perspective provides an opportunity to explore the intersection of knowledge construction, women’s experience, and an interpretation of that experience.

In researching women teachers within their professional learning communities, this study postulates a theory of professional development that is more than an experience of transferring or transmitting knowledge, but requires opportunities for constructing a deeper understanding of what it means to be a teacher within a relational, dialogic experience of learning. This form of professional learning recognizes the need for an embodied understanding of practice that comes from one’s interpretation of experience (Dall’Alba & Sandberg, 2006, p. 392).
New Literacies and the Postmodern

By using the term ‘new literacies,’ I acknowledge and affirm the critical literacies research tradition. But I contend that the concept of literacies must also be rethought in light of postmodern, feminist theory.

I use the term new literacies to designate the social and discursive turn in literacy research in the 1980’s (Heath, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981). At that time, literacy became a site of study that was more than a cognitive skill, but also a plural set of social practices that has “consequences as it acts together with a large number of other social factors, including political and economic conditions, social structures, and local ideologies” (Gee, 1995, p. 58).

Luke (2004a) challenged literacy educators to question how the ideological effects of literate practices are used and “deployed to shape capital, social relations and forms of identity, [and] access to material and discourse resources” in the 21st century (p. 332). These are important questions as we become a society of information and knowledge economies that constantly reinvents linguistic and cultural practices, where literacy is clearly linked to one’s educational and professional upward mobility.

In North America, information technologies, transnational practices, and postcapitalist economies have exposed the limitations of conventional concepts of literacy and have created the need to re-think not just how technologies have changed literacy but also who gets access, who benefits, and what material consequences result in a world still deeply affected by poverty and war (Luke, 2004a). Historically literacy has been a tool of imperial and colonial conquest. To situate literacy as solely and individual experience and responsibility neglects the power of language and literacy practices in constructing cultures.
Literacy as only ‘the ability to write and read’ situates literacy within the individual rather than society. As such it obscures the multiple ways in which literacy interrelates to the workings of power (Gee, 1996, p. 22). Literacy is no longer solely an individual phenomenon, but rather a dual responsibility of social systems and practices. I draw on Lyotard’s (1984) definition of the postmodern as the condition of knowledge in a postindustrial age. The condition of knowledge in the year 2007 has been largely influenced by how technology is organized. These powerful economies of knowledge are found in faster, hypermediated forms of information:

It is reasonable to suppose that the proliferation of information-processing machines is having, and will continue to have, as much of an effect on the circulation of learning as did advancements in human circulation (transportation systems) and later, in the circulation of sounds and visual images (the media). (Lyotard, 1984, p. 4)

Computers and the Internet have radically reconfigured how we process and store information. It has also changed how we engage in literacy practices such as reading.

Lyotard’s work not only predicted a new organization of knowledge through the influence of technology but also the recognition that “scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 7). Within this dissertation I acknowledge the term postmodernity as the “rejection of universal and transcendental foundations of knowledge and thought, and a heightened awareness of the significance of language, discourse, and socio-cultural locatedness in the making of any knowledge-claim” (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 10). A feminist epistemological framework of representing women’s experience and a socio-cultural understanding of reading has guided my interpretation of this study’s findings.

Because I adopt a perspective of feminist research as praxis, I situate literacy practices within a larger social process that is observable in events, mediated by written texts (Barton &
Hamilton, 2000). Such a view of literacy acknowledges the importance of a dialogic exchange of ideas within learning (Freire, 1971).

Research as praxis grounded in a relational model of research seeks to develop empowering methods of research that create transformative social change. This study, as a feminist project, asks how research involving women can work “within and against identity categories, visibility politics, and the romance of the voice” (Lather, 2001, p. 2000).

Supported Access

New literacies within postmodern societies might also question how the organization of knowledge through computers and the Internet can contribute to an understanding of the usefulness of reading environments within a changing world of technologies and economies of knowledge. Literacy educators must design reading environments to enable readers to benefit from increased access to knowledge now made available through the Internet. Advances in technology and access to information, as previously stated, need to be interrogated within the larger moral project of public education by questioning who has access and who benefits from such structures, practices, and discourses.

This study makes a case for supported access to public knowledge through the Internet so that teachers might engage in critical reading of research within their professional learning communities.

The open access movement, which took shape in the late 1990’s, represents an effort to make the peer-reviewed literature from scholarly journals freely available on-line by taking advantage of the World Wide Web. At this time the Directory of Open Access Journal (2007) lists 2587 open access, “free, full text, quality controlled scientific and scholarly journals” available to the public, as well as the vast majority of subscription journals that permit authors to
self-archive their work in open access repositories, although only a small number of authors have done so up to this point.

The supporters of open access advocate for unrestricted, free access to on-line scholarly texts as well as the restructuring of existing institutional digital resources. Self archiving repositories at our universities would allow researchers to publish their papers and findings for further academic use. Citing others’ research is an effective way to critique and build on existing research. The access principal as discussed by John Willinsky (2006), explained that physicists have been archiving and sharing their research in this manner for quite some time. Opponents of self-archiving have felt that it corrupts the peer review process ultimately removing the gatekeeping mechanism that keeps scholarly research reputable. However, Willinsky (2006) argued “it is well within the capacity of the information technology provided by this infrastructure [government and universities] to provide greater public access to this public good known as research and scholarship, without diminishing its quality and quantity. The universities’ capacity to make this work widely available is part of what drives this call for open access” (p. 10).

Another major critique of the open access movement has come from publishers of peer reviewed scholarly journals. Their argument is one of economics. Providing open access they argued is not economically viable. Resources are needed to support a comprehensive review process and pay for other costs of running a publishing house. Peter Suber from SPARC (Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition) has argued that “fee based models can work in some fields where more research funds are needed, like medicine, but arts and humanities could co-exist with a no fee model of open access” (2006). For developing countries, such as Africa, the benefits of open access to research is obvious.

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1 The Public Knowledge Project, of which this study is a part, is also researching the value of open access for institutions in Africa and the use of free open source software for publishing research. See http://pkp.sfu.ca/.
Willinsky (2003) has also argued that reading research on-line presents the opportunity to consider new ways to support the common reader, such as teachers, in “considering how readers could go further and deeper in their experiences within this new information environment” (p. 6). My role as traveling librarian in this study acted as a form of supported access to the teachers, giving them summaries of the texts that went beyond the abstracts, explaining terms, and giving them free, open access to digital on-line resources not otherwise available to them through the university library of which I was a member. This kind of supported access I am arguing in this dissertation provided a rich context for the teachers’ professional learning and growth. This dissertation’s use of supported access supports Willinsky’s (2003) design and research of an on-line reading tool that assists readers in locating hyperlinks and providing context clues that “will extend the common reader’s ability to find meaning and value in scholarly research” (p. 10).

Technology and Gender

Information literacy is vitally important in developing the skills necessary to participate fully in a global economy that is driven by hyper-mediated access to knowledge. Research has shown that gender relations play a significant role within the institutions and projects in which technologies emerge. Conceptually, technology and gender act as a fluid, relational set of processes (Wajcman, 2000, 2002). Research in social theory and technology has firmly established the distinct and inventive ways that gender determines how technologies are shaped, invented, radically altered, and used in different contexts and communities (Bryson & de Castell, 1996; de Castell & Bryson, 2001)

This study’s focus on female educators promises a context in which to further understand how gendered ways of being a teacher intersect with literacy events that are mediated by the Internet and World Wide Web. Viewing technologies as cultural artifacts offers a way to understand the importance of studying not just the form in which these new communications
intersect with our lives, but how our lives intersect, construct, and shape our subjectivities within these various media.

More equitable distribution of access to public research and how professional communities of practice might benefit by such access is the guiding principle of this study. By looking at a form of supported reading in relationship to scholarly research, this study hopes to deepen our understanding of how feminist and educational texts can be distributed and shared as a form of professional development and learning for teachers.

Reading and other literacy practices are being radically reconfigured in an age of information. As much as access to public libraries revolutionized what women and middle class individuals could read, as I discuss in Chapter 2, so too access to the Internet is determining who can develop the skills and knowledge necessary for a knowledge driven, global economy. I suggest that access to information has always been politically driven, and that access to knowledge through the Internet is no exception. Structures of professional development need to address how reading has changed and how reading environments might be designed to enrich professional communities of practices. This is one way to foster teachers’ intellectual work within the public sphere of education.

Context of the Study

This study was conducted in a large urban centre in Western Canada. It is a city of approximately 550,000 with an overall regional population of 2 million people.

As stated, I worked with six women educators who had had more than five years experience in the field, an interest in reading, and curiosity about issues regarding gender and technology. Five of the six participants are White, and one is Vietnamese.

I locate the practice of reading in a broad perspective that integrates work on cognition, language, social interaction, society, and culture. I explored how participants talked about their
engagement with the research texts, their criticisms, gaps, and if they would recommend these texts to any of their colleagues to read. I was interested in the school connections, narratives, and the intertextualities of our discussions and interviews.

Outline of Thesis

This study is divided into seven chapters:

Chapter 1 is the introduction to the study. It provides a synopsis of each chapter.

Chapter 2 sets up the analytic framework for the study. Through a literature review of the gendered practices of reading, I present a feminist approach to reading that constructs the relationship between reading and the intellectual landscape of teachers as a possible form of professional development within communities of practice.

Chapter 3 presents the methodological framework and the research process used in the study. I expand on the definitions for key terms used within the conceptual framework as well as provide a detailed description and rationale for the design and implementation of the study.

Chapter 4 is the first of three chapters that analyzes the data generated during the fifteen-month period of this study. This chapter extends the discussion of Chapter 2 on women reading groups by looking at specifically how, if at all, the teacher reading group contributed to a form of political praxis. By looking at three examples of how the participants engaged in a discourse of social justice, I ask if there was evidence of learning and engagement through reading that contributed to a revitalization of thinking and acting for the teachers.

Chapter 5 I analyze how this study's form of *supported access* to knowledge impacted the teachers' professional knowledge landscape, particularly how such access contributed to their professional conversations about teaching.

Chapter 6 analyzes how the teachers extended their teacher identities and reconceptualized their understanding of pedagogy in relationship to one another and their school
communities through a form of supported reading. Moving beyond seeing learning exclusively as an internal process, in this chapter I analyze how the structure and nature of a supported reading environment contributed to a social theory of learning that is "an evolving, continuously renewed set of relations" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 50).

Chapter 7 provides a summary and discussion of the main research question: How does supported access to scholarly and educational research texts influence the relationship between teacher learning, reading, and professional development within teachers' communities of practice? This chapter presents key recommendations for theory, practice, and policy.
Chapter 2

Reading and the Public Sphere: Teacher Learning and Communities of Practice

This chapter presents a literature review of the gendered practices of reading and outlines the analytic framework used in this dissertation. I present a feminist approach to reading that constructs the relationship between reading, supported access to on-line research through the Internet, and the intellectual landscape of teachers as a possible form of professional development within their communities of practice.

I briefly review the history of critical literacy development from a Western gendered perspective. My aim is to show how reading clubs enable groups to reimagine the social world and have the potential to be places of transformation and change. I argue that reading clubs create opportunities for thinking outside the dominant masculinist foundations of the literary imagination. By looking at how particular women have constructed their literary experiences, primarily in the private sphere, I suggest that these examples demonstrate the value of such practices for teachers' personal and professional growth. Reading is a negotiated relational practice able to provide a re-imagining of the social world. The interaction between the reader and the text can construct new ways of interpreting experience. Within this dissertation I argue in favor of a form of reading club pedagogy that provides a socially situated learning experience for teachers.

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2 A version of this chapter has been published as Twomey, S. (2007). Reading ‘woman’: Book club pedagogies and the literary imagination. *Journal of Adult and Adolescent Literacy* 50(5), 398-407.
Reading in the Public Sphere

Literacy has always been inherently political, involved in power relations and a tool of colonial conquest and imperialism (P. Gee, 1996; Willinsky, 1998). In the ancient city-states of Ancient Greece, the public, political sphere was reserved for the literate. Although women read, this practice was typically private, away from the political processes of society and outside the public sphere of learning and knowledge production. Literacy was positioned within an established hierarchy of interpretative authority in which it acted both as a “liberator” and a “weapon” (Gee, 1996, p. 30). In the colonial legacy of the Western world, language and literacy were powerful tools with which to assimilate, destroy, and persecute indigenous populations (Collins & Blot, 2003; Willinsky, 1998). Columbus’ founding of the New World began Spanish authority as textual imperialism “par excellence” (Collins & Blot, 2003, p. 125). Imperialism’s legacy and the “lingering colonial intricacies” (Willinsky, 1998, p. 333) of the educated imagination serve Western interests: “The West’s educational project, for all of the methodical, fascinating, and helpful learning it produced, has taught us to divide up the world, to think about identity and difference, in ways that serves the West all too well” (p. 332).

Although authorities have used literacy to maintain the hierarchy of political systems throughout history, women in 18th century France and England, learned the dominant discourse necessary to liberate themselves from their oppression (Collins & Blot, 2003; Myers, 1990). The gendering of knowledge within the imperialist and masculinist foundation of Western literary practices, however, left women’s contribution out of the canon. At the end of the 18th century in Europe, women such as Sarah Fielding and Jane Collier began to establish themselves as intellectuals (Myers, 1990). The results of such efforts are seen in the German and French salons.
and the English “Bluestocking Circle” where women fought to have the right to read and write in
the public sphere (Myers, 1990).

Virginia Woolf (2000) described the exclusion that women still faced in the early 20th
century. When the professoriate turned her away from entering a library, she wrote in response:
“I refuse to allow you, Beadle though you are, to turn me off the grass. Lock up your libraries if
you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind” (p.
76). Woolf’s words resonate ....

Literacy’s paradoxical power to promise and restrict persists in Western educational
practices. The legacy of access, ability, and styles of literacy has maintained systems of cultural
and institutional power in which illiteracy is still used as a tool against women worldwide (A.
Luke, 1993, p. ix). This access to education and literacy is clearly gender demarcated in which
“women in much of the world lack support for fundamental functions of a human life”
(Nussbaum, 2001, p. 1). Luce Irigaray (1985) has discussed how the entry into language is entry
into a system of masculine representation, which creates a double displacement for girls within
their psycho-socio development. A reading pedagogy that would put women “explicitly and
powerfully into the discourses of schooling” (Luke, 1993, p. vii) is taken up by Linda Christian-
Smith (1993) in her analysis of girls’ reading of popular culture genres. She clearly identified
reading and writing as gendered practices that position and constitute individuals within
masculinist practices and frameworks, when in fact there are feminine practices of reading that
offer distinct and creative responses to multiple subjectivities.

Reader Response and Gendered Practices of Reading

Reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1983) enabled a feminist theorizing of reading. Feminists
challenged the dominant masculinist discourse of reading practices by adopting the significance
of Rosenblatt’s concept of reading as an artfully constructed transaction between a reader and a
text, questioning a developmental approach to language/literacy in which the subject was positioned very much within the cognitive processes of language development (Chomsky, 2001). Reader response theory challenged the formality of the literary experience by suggesting that "literature makes comprehensible the myriad of ways in which human beings meet the infinite possibilities that life offers" (Rosenblatt, 1983, p. 6). The literary experience was no longer a solitary act in a process of meaning making. Nor was meaning making contingent only on readers' ability to code and decode texts. The reading experience became a way to live through the text, to explore the world through the medium of literature. Reader response theory shifted the reader to the center of the reading process, through a dialogic, relational focus involving the text. Readers now had a form of agency that was absent in the earlier approaches to language and literacy.

However, reader response theory fits poorly with the discursive shift in literacy because texts are inextricably connected through interrelated, power-laden social and cultural practices. Within this view of literacy, texts have power to construct and maintain representations of social identity and hegemonic practices within institutions like schools (Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984). Although Rosenblatt (1983) emphasized that social frameworks influence how texts are interpreted and how they speak to the reader, this approach to reading reinforced the concept of literacy as an individual experience. Reader response theory has been criticized for failing to address gender and other socio/cultural notions of identity (Mills, 1994).

**Reading 'Woman'**

Simone de Beauvoir's famous work *The Second Sex* (1993), declared 'woman' to be socially constructed, not born. Gender was theorized as a socially constructed framework of masculine and feminine discourses distinct from the legacy of biological maleness and femaleness (Cameron, 1992). Since then feminist linguists have declared language to be a form of social
action that can resist and subvert gendered assumptions and beliefs. Language or discourse acts as an interpellator, defining and constructing our identities. An example would be use of the term ‘Ms’. If an individual chooses to use Ms. in front of her surname, feminists would theorize this as a way to resist a heterosexual privileging of defining someone according to their martial status. A feminist magazine called “Bitch” is also a good example of how feminists have taken a derogatory signifier of a powerful woman and reclaimed the word as something positive.

Feminist linguists and literary scholars, interested in the power of language and literacy in contributing to women’s emancipation, have also conducted research on the gendered practices of reading. In a compelling study of the Book-of-the-Month club in North America during the growth of modernism in the 1920’s and 1930’s, Radway’s (1997) study explored the power of “acquiring, owning, reading and talking” (p. 8) about books made possible through a mail order book subscription program. Women were creating their own cultural experiences and literary interpretations of classic texts. Radway suggested that the threat to the authority of the “man of letters, the white, middle class citizen of the bourgeois republic”, was the The-Book-of-the-Month club’s “principle transgression” (p. 246).

Although Radway (1997) stated that the book club was somewhat complacent about social hierarchies and practices, in many ways it became subversive to the highbrow literary circles of the academy, acting as a modern cultural institution and mediator with the literary critics of the time. The book clubs became a place in which serious social problems were addressed from a moral, individual point of view. ³

In an earlier study of women reading romance novels, Radway (1984) postulated a new understanding of the reading process that resisted a universalized and masculinist interpretation

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³ Ironically, the Book-of-the-Month Club contributed to racism, excluding black women from participating in the white women’s reading groups.
of texts. Women reading romance novels from a distinctly feminine stance also transcended the elitist high culture of literary circles of the time:

Romances were not only subtle and varied but immediately relevant to the conditions of their daily lives. They [the women readers interviewed] showed me that romance fiction constituted a complex, living literature in the context of their day-to-day concerns, and this only increased my doubts about the intrinsic status of textual complexity and the purported universality of the sacred literary canon (Radway, 1997, p. 5).

This earlier study of women reading fed Radway’s interest in studying the phenomenon of Harry Scherman’s mail order book subscription program.

The-book-of-the-Month club, which began in 1926 in New York City, became a cultural institution that catered to the bourgeoning middle class consumer and common reader. The reading of literature became an accessible cultural practice of the “middlebrow” that challenged the “transcendent and idealized culture embodied in the literary classic” (Radway, 1997, p. 153). The Book-of-the-Month club signaled the beginning modernist cultural practices of the common reader who read books for pleasure as well as edification and learning. Radway (1997) suggested that the shift to a middle brow reading culture reflected women’s changing social situation and the energy of modern feminism (p. 189).

In the years since Rosenblatt’s (1983) research on reader response theory, the relationship between gender and reading has influenced reading theory by further questioning the possibility of a unified subject. The individuality of reader’s response is suspect (Mills, 1994). This approach to reader response theory provokes more questions about the difficulty in representing any kind of determinate subject such as ‘woman’ or ‘teacher’. However, through engaging in literature, readers may experience different self identities. Sumara (2002) advocates that reader response theory is a way to “create opportunities for both the continued invention of the reader
and the ongoing production of knowledge that occurs during acts of reading and interpretation” (p.12). Sumara (1996) postulated a theory of learning in which identity emerges in relation to people, books, and other communicative language based technologies. His theory of reading is based on an intertextual approach to literature. Embedded in this complex ecology are the multiple subjectivities we all embody as well as the differences that define and shape who we are in relation to each other.

Texts are mediated by the point of view structured by the texts, “other positions available within the texts, and the reader as a complex social subject” (Boardman, 1994, p. 201). Janice Radway (1997, 1991) postulated that locating how women resist the dominant position offered in texts is difficult to determine. Radway used the context of romance novels to show how women negotiate identity as a site to construct notions of desire and pleasure. Her research on women reading romance identified a particular ambiguity that the woman readers took up in their resistance to the fictional elements of the romance novels they read. The reading of books indicated “signs of longing for absent things, for the thrill of wider experience and the promise of greater knowledge, rather than as the occasion for an accomplished performance of the self in the act of delivering an assured interpretation or judgment” (Radway, 1997, p. 7). As well, The Book-of-the-Month Club functioned as a way for women to subvert and reconstruct identity and authority by controlling the meaning and interpretation of the text from within their own discursive frameworks.

Elizabeth Long’s (2003) exploratory study of 121 reading groups, comprised of white women in Texas just after the U.S. Civil War, offered similar insight on the historical and cultural production of identity through reading. Her study interrogated “the meaning of reading, the culture and constitution of subjectivity, and woman’s relationship to the public sphere” (p. xviii). With evidence of reading groups dating as far back as the 12th century, “textual
communities" challenged tradition and generated knowledge that has influenced the politics and culture of modernity in the Western world (Stock cited in Long, p. 32). As much of the recorded reading practices and groups remain, the invisible reading groups of predominantly women have been located within the private sphere of women’s social gatherings. Yet, we also know that women from all races and backgrounds have used the literary canon “to move from silence to speech: in order to become speaking, thinking, and knowing subjects” (D. Smith, 1999, p. 187). Attention to these groups has generated a “newly complex and gender-balanced” (Long, 2003, p. 33) perspective on the history of literacy in North America.

Long’s (2003) historical overview of women’s literary circles showed that they not only offered solidarity and reprieve from the isolation of domestication, but also were places of textual analysis and intellectual engagement. The collective identity fostered in the circles helped to propel the early feminist movement, women’s political influence, and social reform (Long, 2003, p. 50).

Laura Ahearn’s (2004) study of literacy practices in Nepal emphasizes that social reform is complex and reminds researchers that “literacy is not a neutral, unidimensional technology, but rather a set of lived experiences that will differ from community to community” (p. 306). Ahearn shows how the increase in female literacy rates in one Nepalese community reinforced certain gender ideologies and catalyzed social change. The community developed courtship practices such as marriages self-initiated by villagers writing of love letters (p. 305). Her study also postulated that the energy of people rather than the technology of literacy itself, creates social change (p. 306). Ahearn avoids making simplistic universal statements about literacy and its power to transform by situating her study within the intertextuality of literacy practices and the social, historical, economic, religious, and political context of the community she was researching. This work is important because it emphasizes the need to examine the social context
of any form of literacy practice and the difficulty in universalizing the transformative practice of literacy.

**Reading as Social Transformation**

Azar Nafisi’s (2003) *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a powerful story of 12 women who meet weekly over 12 months to discuss literature within the repressive Islamic state of Iran. This story is an example of how reading common literary texts can “create opportunities to interpret personal and collective experience” (Sumara, 2002, p. 19). Nafisi’s story is about how her students, through participation in a reading group, were able to challenge the oppression of their lives:

> An absurd fictionality rules our lives. We tried to live in the open spaces, in the chinks created between that room, which had become our protective cocoon, and the censor’s world of witches and goblins outside. Which of these two worlds was more real, and to which did we really belong? We no longer knew the answers. Perhaps one way of finding out the truth was to do what we did: to try to imaginatively articulate these two worlds and, through that process, give shape to our vision and identity. (Nafisi, 2003, p. 26)

Nafisi’s (2003) text takes the reader on a journey through revolution and the atrocities of war in Iran presenting the aftermath of the 1979 revolution. The story, also about Nafisi’s life as a professor of literature, describes a place in which human suffering becomes somehow tolerable through the imaginative world of literary characters. In 1979, at the beginning of the revolution in Iran, the author recounted one of her introductory literature classes:

> I wrote on the board one of my favourite lines from the German thinker, Theodor Adorno: “The highest form of morality is not to feel at home in one’s own home.” I explained that most great works of the imagination were meant to make you feel like a
stranger in your own home. The best fiction always forced us to question what we took for granted. I told my students that I wanted them in their readings to consider in what ways these works unsettled them, made them a little uneasy, made them look around and consider the world, like Alice and Wonderland, through different eyes. (Nafisi, p. 94)

It was through these discussions around literature that Nafisi’s students begin to see the world through different eyes. Sumara (2002) suggested that the reading of texts can improve the quality of lived experiences. Although that may seem impossible in the political context of Iran, the female students of Tehran gained the ability “to question and prod our own realities, about which we felt so helplessly speechless (Nafisi, 2003, p. 39). The reading group found comfort in exploring works of literature which enabled them to articulate “all that happened to us in our own words and [to see] ourselves, for once, in our own image” (Nafisi, p. 57). Literature is not simply a reflection of life, but a particular version of life in which all texts are partial, “always fragmentary and never neutral” (Mellor & Patterson, 2004, p. 88), offering another version or visibility to the historically invisible subjectivities generated in spaces outside the public sphere of knowledge production.

Nafisi’s (2003) book stands out for her ability to capture the act of reading as a socially constructed moment that radically altered how the women dress, speak, gesture, and talk. Radway (1997) postulated the “deep involvement of the body in the act of reading” (p. 13). The work of Bronwyn Davies (2000; 1988) inscribed a relationship between body and landscapes as a way to understand one’s subjectification process with the environment. French feminist Helene Cixous (1986) has said that “woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement” (p. 5).

The reading of texts can become an embodied experience able to transform how we see ourselves in the world. “Language in this embodied reading/writing is not separate from and
controlling the body, but is a force of the body, a possibility of individual and collective bodies” (Davies, 2000, p. 253). Madeline Grumet’s (1988) notion of “bodyreading” helps to explain how literary clubs and reading groups have shifted the relationship between reader, text, and the world and the relationship between the public and private sphere. The intertextuality between the text and the embodied female experience contributes to meaning and knowledge construction. Reading becomes “an act that is oriented toward what the subject can do in the world… Bodyreading is strung between the poles of our actual situation…and the possibilities that texts point to” (Grumet, p. 130). Kress (2000) talks about how the materiality of meaning-making process lies in the interface between the natural world and the cultural world. If we then look at the body as an interface in which the loss of a locatable, universal subject can become “a threshold, a field of intersecting material and symbolic forces” (Braidotti, 2003, p. 45), where multiple codes are inscribed, we find a theory of reader response that can speak to the complexity of a new kind of literary imagination.

Nafisi’s (2003) experience of teaching literature in Iran explored reading and the questioning of female identities. The reading group members had a collective experience of interpretation, reading between the lines and among the intertextualities of material hardship, politics, and the role of teacher and student. Their reading brought their desires to the surface. Nafisi’s life became intimately intertwined with her students. As Grumet (1988) said, “the text is material, it has texture, it is woven; we pull and tug at it, it winds around us, we are tangled up in it” (p. 144).

In summary, the reading of books within a community can shape how literacy positions learning as a form of counter-hegemonic cultural practice. Long (2003) demonstrated the power of white women working collectively to influence many areas of politics and culture. According to Long (2003), many public libraries in the United States exist today because of women’s
reading groups during the early suffragette movement and the consciousness raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s that developed a collective voice and influence.

**A Feminist Pedagogy of Reading**

I have presented the possibility of how the act of reading can act as a form of collective resistance and multivocal understanding of interpretation and cultural practice. The discursive shift in literacy defined within such a framework understands language "as the most powerful constitutive force shaping what we understand as possible, and what we desire in those possibilities" (Davies, 1993). This concept of reading describes literacy as a form of social/political practice that connects differences in new ways. Reading as a social process can be seen as "a collective project attuned to the political dimensions of the personal as the intimate site of the workings of the social" (Kelly, 1997, p. 135).

A reading pedagogy, sifted through the collective legacy of feminism, promises to reframe the literary experience. Deleuze and Guattari's (1987), through their analysis of Virginia Woolf's writing inscribe the "woman becoming" and the feminist movement itself as a terrain in which the contradictions and incoherence of identity can find another place to affirm the political legacy of feminism's response to difference. The female subject ceases to exist as the foundation of feminism, but acts as a nomad, traveling between the binaries of male and female subjectivities (Colebrook & Buchanan, 2000).

Thinking itself becomes movement or "lines of flight" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 3). A feminist politics of the future is made possible in the lines of flight or movement between the essentialized entity of sexual difference and the conception of the female subject as "neither a biological nor a sociological category, but rather as a point of overlap between the physical, the symbolic, and the material social conditions" (Braidotti, 2003, p. 44). This kind of femininity finds new lines of flight into learning that can embrace relationality amongst difference.
A feminist practice of reading opens up new possibilities of interpretation and social change. The feminist movement has shown us that women have always found new ways to think and act differently in the world. A feminist pedagogy of reading encourages a way to think about our multiple subjectivities outside the politics of identity promising a new conceptual space of feminine imaginaries. The “multi-centered enfleshed subject” (Braidotti, 2003, p. 60) of the reading ‘woman’ can find an exciting new place that exists between the utopian vision of a determinate subject and an essentialized notion of gender.

Reader response theory legitimized a form of reading pedagogy and engagement that had been happening for centuries for women, both individually and collectively, in the intimate spaces of their home. The women of the 1800’s, the female students of Iran and the many invisible women’s reading clubs that continue to this day are able to construct meaning from texts that redefines notions of identity and generates knowledge that includes the subjectivities of those seemingly absent from the Western masculinist canon of literature. Women have dared to dream in this new language in which words have the hot molten effect of lava (Woolf, 1977), shifting our intellectual landscapes of learning. Women’s book clubs teach us is that reading, as a social process of learning, can transform communities.

Reading and Teacher Communities of Practice

Lave and Wenger (1991) utilize the term, “communities of practice” to imply “participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities” (p. 98). The meaning that we derive through participation produces our communities of practice as well as our subjectivities. How teachers engage with learning is critical to keeping them energized and effective in the classroom. Relationships, school environments, previous experiences, and negotiating a professional identity are significant elements in how teachers engage with each other within their
communities of practice (Hargreaves, 2001; Reio, 2005; Day, 2002; Britzman, 1991; Phelan, 2005). The teacher reading group of this study I will argue facilitated opportunities for the teachers to think more deeply and expansively about their identities and practice within their professional learning communities. A feminist approach to reading opens up possibilities for teachers to interpret their experience in new ways.

Teachers need opportunities to reflect on their work and to associate with their colleagues in non-prescriptive, communicative models of exchange (Glazer, Abbott, & Harris, 2004; Sherin & Shulman, 2004). Schon’s (1983) research on teachers’ use of reflective practice as a tool for professional growth and Clandinin and Connelly’s (1995) research with teacher’s classroom narratives have shaped how teachers can grow and learn within their professional knowledge landscapes. Teachers who can learn how to sustain their intellectual practice within the demands of teaching also find ways to keep their classroom practice vibrant. Mary Kooy’s (2006) recent study of novice teachers’ engagement in a book club as a form of support and professional development addresses this issue: “Understanding what teachers know, how they know it, and how their epistemologies develop has become increasingly critical in light of findings connecting quality and extent of teacher knowledge to the quality of student experience/knowledge” (p. 661). Professional development models are needed that can support teachers in finding ways to nurture their love of learning through engaged reading and professional learning.
Chapter 3

Conceptual Design & Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological framework of the study. I expand on the definitions of key terms used in the conceptual design. I provide a detailed description and rationale for the design and implementation of the study.

Purpose of the Study

Within a feminist understanding of professional development, this study’s purpose is to further our understanding of how to nurture teachers’ love of learning. In this dissertation I present a case for teacher learning through increased access to knowledge now made available through the Internet. I chose to work with the six teachers in this study because I wished to better understand how, if at all, female teachers’ intellectual practice through reading might find political praxis in the public sphere of education.

This qualitative study investigates the learning processes of six female educators in context of reading as a form of professional development. The study asks how participation in a teacher reading group can foster female educators’ professional development and intellectual engagement with feminist texts. In generating an analysis I looked for evidence that this group’s approach to reading contributed to their comprehension, evaluation, and utilization of primarily feminist texts and educational research.

New Landscapes of Feminism

Researching women’s experience has contributed to a deeper understanding of the human condition. In the 1980’s across Canadian university campuses, feminists worked hard to legitimize women’s knowledge and research through the development of Women’s Studies departments. The category of ‘woman’ was being radically deconstructed. Black feminist and
third world feminists criticized the limited vision of a white, middle class feminist movement. I was just beginning my career as teacher in a small inner city school in southeastern Ontario during the 1980’s. I was working in a school with generations of students experiencing poverty and unemployment. The challenges of working in this environment influenced my thinking and feminist consciousness. Many of the female students I was working with were living in poverty and unquestioned roles of single motherhood. I began to question the assumptions that shaped many of the ideological constructs of the curriculum. Reading feminist theory provided a vital energy for my work. Sharing these ideas with my colleagues was also important in maintaining my effectiveness as a teacher.

Throughout my Ph.D. program I have struggled with how to continue feminist work/research in the university. My early readings of feminist pedagogy inspired me to practice teaching as a transformative political practice. However, the belief that feminism “can encompass all womankind…within a set of demands that are as passionate as they are desperate” (Kristeva, 2004, p. 495), ignores the complexity of the female experience across differences of race, class, and ability. The category of ‘woman’ does not define a monolithic concept. Any totalizing gesture of ‘woman’ as a category “has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social and political intersections in which the concrete array of ‘women’ are constructed” (Butler, 1999, p. 19). The challenge remains to theorize and conduct feminist research within this contemporary and complex changing landscape of feminisms.

Reflexivity and Feminist Research

Feminists’ ability to reflect and deconstruct the complexities of difference within the feminist movement has provided the energy for the movement to continue. Reflection and reflexivity are different practices used by researchers within the history of philosophical sciences and social science research. We need only think of the term ‘reflection’, sometimes confused with
reflexivity, as the ability to question one’s self understanding. The researcher’s objective
capabilities are critiqued within a reflexive research methodology. It is no longer possible as a
researcher to define one’s position as a “view from nowhere” or “God’s eye view” (Haraway,
1988). A feminist reflexive practice of research considers how the research produced can be
useful, how the research can be empowering to women, and how the research can link with
political action; or research as praxis (Pillow, 2003, p. 178).

Scholars have theorized ways of understanding the distinctive nature of ‘woman’s’
experience in numerous ways (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991; Harstock, 1983; Heckman, 1997;
Smith, 1990; Dorothy Smith, 1999). Feminists have argued that women have epistemological
privilege in researching other women and oppressed groups because of their experience. This
way of looking at research deviates from the masculinist legacy of the researcher as an objective
observer.

This crisis of representation in social science research (Lyotard, 1984) has called into
question the relationship between research and representation. The discursive or linguistic turn
(Rorty, 1992), which positioned the role of language in constructing reality, made the researcher
consider how to represent another. Within feminist theory, this crisis has provoked critical
reflexivity about the relationship between the textual, political, and material world of ‘woman’s’
lives.

The evolution of different kinds of feminist representations in research has come out of a
productive tension between feminist theories of difference, identity, and politics. There are no
innocent readings of how we interpret our world or data. We bring our own locations, power
structures, and boundaries to our perceptions. Davies (2004) suggested that language can be
deconstructed to show alternate meanings and critiques of the construction of dominant models
of discourse. We are implicated from within our own lives in the “complexity of the movement
and intersections amongst knowledge, power, and subjectivity” (p. 5). The authority of a researcher’s work is finally the meaning and life that others give to their reading and how that contributes to other ways of thinking.

These elements of feminist reflexivity informed how I conceptualized and conducted this study. One of my goals was to try and create a reciprocal environment for the teachers that nurtured their curiosity and interest in reading.

The Design

Over the course of the study, we read mostly scholarly texts. I had three distinct roles in the study. I conducted interviews, I facilitated our monthly discussions, and I searched digital databases to locate articles on the topics that the teachers were eager to read.

I position this work within a post-postivistic framework (Lather 1986; 2001) in which there are no absolutes and no such thing as neutral research. I brought the participants together on purpose to structure a participatory learning experience within a teacher community of practice. During the teacher reading group, the participants discussed the readings, shared food, and had conversations about their lives. Within feminist theory, the body has been analyzed as a locus of social control as well as central to the construction of identity. Cultural acts, such as the teachers’ participation in the reading group are “inscribed and reinforced through the concrete language of the body” (Bordo, 1989, p. 13). A feminist study aims “to return women to those places from which they have been dis- or re-placed or expelled…and produce the possibility of occupying, dwelling or living in new spaces, which in their turn help generate new perspectives, new bodies, new ways of inhabiting” (Grosz cited in Somerville, 2004, p. 124).

The study of ‘women’s’ experience needs to include a dialogue between the corporeal and cultural discursive practices of subject’s lives: “Research into lived experience of the body must acknowledge and engage in this dialectic if we are to disrupt the liberal humanist self of
phenomenological research” (p. 51). Learning involves the whole person, a landscape of “shapes, degrees, and textures - of community membership” that constitutes and constructs identities (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 35).

The Research Questions

How does supported access to scholarly and educational research texts influence the relationship between teacher learning, reading, and professional development within teachers’ communities of practice?

The following questions guided the study and informed what was discussed in the interviews:

1. What, if any, effect does participation in a teacher reading group have on female educators’ subjectivities, interest, and engagement with educational research?

2. How do the discursive practices of the teacher reading group shape the engagement and construction of knowledge within feminist research as praxis?

3. How does a form of supported access (through information technologies) to feminist research and scholarship in education and beyond contribute to the experiences of this teacher reading group of female educators?

4. How does supported access contribute to: the range of topics discussed and the evolving expression of reading interests within the group; to the participants' thinking about their professional identities and perception of their work; to their thinking about their pedagogical practices; to a larger understanding of themselves and their lives, going beyond these professional concerns?

Selection

Because I wished to focus more on the participants’ individual interest and engagement with professional learning, rather than on achieving a particular homogenous representation of
teachers, I chose a purposive or theoretically driven sampling method (Palys, 1997). I selected a small group of women who had had more than five years experience in the field, an interest in reading, and a curiosity about issues regarding gender and technology. I selected participants who wanted to explore professional learning with their colleagues and had established a sense of their professional identity in the field.

By choosing to conduct this study with teachers from the Vancouver school system, all of the participants were accessible geographically. We were all able to meet for our group interviews in my home in Vancouver. My previous work with the Vancouver School Board facilitated access to participants. Some of the personal interviews were carried out at participants' schools, mostly during lunch or after school with permission from the principal. I took responsibility for distributing the readings to participants. The majority of texts we read as a group were feminist texts. These included empirical research articles, philosophy, and other scholarly texts. Individual participants read a variety of texts; fiction, curriculum materials, newspaper, and articles in newspapers and magazines. (See Appendix B & C.)

Many of my colleagues were already aware that I was pursuing my Ph.D. and often talked to me about my research. I had previous conversations in the school hallways with teachers about women and reading, access to knowledge, and the use of public libraries. These preliminary conversations with teachers were also about how to stay intellectually engaged in our practice. When I was ready to start generating data I began talking to my colleagues about my plans and asked them to consider participation. I drafted and distributed a short letter introducing my study to teachers who showed interest. I talked to teachers, multicultural workers, and child and youth workers in both elementary and secondary schools across Greater Vancouver. The teachers I talked to had concerns about how much time it would take to
participate in the study. I stressed that partial participation was also an option if they were unable
to meet collectively for the teacher reading group.

I established early on a comfortable rapport and openness to how participants were able
to participate. There were some minor changes from the first group interview to the last in terms
of the number of people who expressed interest in the study, but I ended up with six participating
teachers. All of the individual participants interviewed were also group participants. Both
individual and group interviews were audiotaped for the purpose of generating data.

The Participants (pseudonyms)

Maxine is a teacher/librarian at a large secondary school in Vancouver with over 25 years of
experience. She is white and a mother of two grown children.

Dora is a teacher/counselor with over ten years experience also at a secondary school in
Vancouver. She is currently finishing a master’s of counseling program. Dora is white, her first
language is Portuguese, she is single, and she has no children.

Pivoine Jaune is a multicultural liaison worker working with both elementary and
secondary students within urban schools in Vancouver for 16 years. She is Vietnamese and
speaks five languages, single, and no children.

Amanda is an elementary school resource teacher who works predominately with
English-as-second-language (ESL) students and has been both a secondary and elementary
teacher for 16 years. She is white, married, with no children.

Sally is a teacher/counselor at two separate elementary schools in the Lower Mainland of
Vancouver, with five years experience. She is white, single, with no children.

Louisa has been a secondary school teacher for 28 years. She is currently a Department
Head of ESL and instructor for English and ESL. She is white, single with no children.
Participant Tasks

Participants engaged in four tasks in this study:

1. Personal interviews (2-3 each)
2. Group interviews or “teacher reading group” (a total of 5)
3. Series of short written responses to my questions
4. Taking of notes or reflections on the readings in a reader response journal

Setting

The study was conducted in a Vancouver, a large urban centre of Western Canada. It is a city of approximately 550,000 with an overall larger population of 2 million people. Vancouver has a diverse ethnic population; Indo-Canadians, Filipino, Southeast Asian, Korean, Japanese, Black, and White. Visible minorities make up approximately half of the residents of this large urban city. There is also a significant population of Aboriginal peoples from rural British Columbia communities as well as from across Canada. The Musquem Reserve of the Coast Salish people is on the southwest periphery of the city.

All of the group interviews, except one, took place on Friday afternoons from approximately 3:00 pm - 6:00 pm in my home. Our last group interview took place in the resource centre of a centrally located secondary school.

Personal interviews were conducted at participants’ homes, work environments, and coffee shops.

Selection of the Texts

The introductory meeting for the study was held on November 26, 2004. This meeting was set up for the participants to meet and set a direction for the reading group. This first meeting determined that I would be responsible for locating the articles or texts once the teachers had
agreed upon a topic. They chose their first topic at this meeting and subsequent topics at the end of each group interview. The teachers at this first meeting also decided that they wanted to meet once a month to discuss the readings. From my field notes I wrote:

Our meeting started at 3pm. We had already discussed my role and it was clear that there was keen interest in reading more academic texts as well as the possibility of books. We discussed the line between personal and professional interests. Everyone agreed that they were interested in articles that offered a more global perspective. The strength of women, multiculturalism, and women’s rights are topics they would like to start with. The participants asked if I would select some articles and send them along to them for our next meeting which we decided would be the last Friday of every month. Our meeting ended at 6pm. (Field notes, November 26, 2004)

The group decided that the time they would need to locate the readings would impede the process. I was given a general topic by the teachers and selected articles based on their decisions. Our first selection was a text by Julia Kristeva (2001). Julia Kristeva is a French feminist whose work on the body and maternal elements of subjectivity became the reading for the topic on the strength of women. The introduction, entitled “Female Genius,” problematized the notion of genius through her discussion about three famous female writers; Collette (1873-1954), Melanie Klein (1882-1960), and Hannah Arendt (1906-1975):

Everyone knows that women, through an osmosis with the species that makes them radically different from men, inherit substantial obstacles to realizing their genius and to contributing another specific, if not ingenious, talent to the culture of humanity that they shelter in their wombs. (p. xiv)

My interest in the writing of bell hooks became the second place I looked for readings about the intersections of multiculturalism, women, and teaching. I suggested the first two

The teachers chose to meet again on January 28, 2005. I handed out the texts from hooks and Kristeva. The teachers seemed interested in continuing to read feminist philosophy and scholarly texts. The construction and focus of the project felt fluid and still very much in process as we discussed what and how we wanted to read. Everyone seemed happy with my two selections and we decided to meet late March, early April to discuss the Kristeva and hooks readings. We also discussed how we might expand the group to include more teachers.

The teachers met again on April 1, 2005 and discussed bell hooks’ (1994) and Julia Kristeva’s (2001) texts. My field notes reflect the vibrancy of the discussion:

It was just two women today, but an invigorating conversation that touched on a lot of issues about women and education. They have requested a summary of the articles I select with questions that will prompt discussion when we meet again. (Field notes, April 1, 2005).

On April 7, 2005 I delivered 8 packages to the participants. In these packages I included personalized reader response journals that I had constructed as well as the two articles I had selected on the topic of ‘sexuality and ESL students’ chosen at the previous group session April 1, 2005, as well as a series of questions for our discussion on April 29, 2005. See Appendix D for the questions.

Six teachers attended the April 29, 2005 meeting and agreed to begin audiotaping the sessions. This session focused on the two readings by Norton and Pavenlenko (2004), entitled “Addressing Gender in the ESL/EFL Classroom”, and Cynthia Nelson’s (1999) piece, “Sexual Identities in ESL: Queer Theory and Classroom Inquiry.” There were four more group sessions: July 15, 2005, October 14, 2005, October 27, 2005 and finally February 6, 2006.
As stated previously, feminist philosophy, pedagogy and educational research texts became the focus of our group readings. Individually however, participants requested and read from a much larger range of genres and articles of interest (see Appendix C).

Materials Used

Texts

Please see Appendix B for a complete list of the texts used during the reading sessions. These readings deliberately included a variety of genres, including research texts, empirical studies, case studies, theoretical discussions, magazine articles, newspaper articles, memoirs, and book chapters on the topics that participants generated.

Appendix C is a complete list of readings that were distributed to participants on an individual basis. These texts included empirical studies, theoretical articles, magazine and newspaper articles, books, reviews, biographical information on authors of interest, curriculum support materials, policy documents, and websites.

Three of the six participants shared their interest in reading by providing me with articles or books that they found meaningful. Pivoine Jaune shared a book of poetry with me entitled, Two Shores Deux Rives: Poems (Vuong-Riddick, 1995). Maxine was keen for me to read her unpublished Master’s thesis, entitled Thinking Critically about Social Studies: Women’s Perspectives. Louisa suggested I read an article from Harper’s magazine about her interest in China called “The City of Tomorrow: Searching for the Future of Architecture in Shanghai,” (Kingwell, 2005).

Reader Response Journals

Each participant was given a reader response journal to record her thoughts while reading the selected articles and texts. The participants were asked to use the journals to record questions, comments, or question they had while reading the articles. I stressed that these journals were for
their personal use and were not required as data for the study unless they wished to share them. None of the teachers indicated that they were using the journal throughout the study. No participants shared their journals with me after the study.

The Group Interview

As stated, the teachers established three topics of interest at the first meeting. These topics became the focus for the first three group sessions. Four participants attended the first session. The teachers discussed details about where we would like to meet, the amount of time they would like for each teacher reading group session, the frequency of meeting, and their collective topics of interest. The teachers established three topics of interest at this first meeting: strength of women, multiculturalism, and women’s emancipation from a global perspective. These suggestions for topics came from a discussion about the distinction between professional and personal interests and how the study’s readings might find a place between the two. All of the participants were very interested in talking about these issues outside a Westocentric perspective. Participants also talked openly about work pressures and the challenge of finding balance in the busyness of work and life. Like our first meeting and subsequent meetings, a topic was decided at the end of each teacher reading group, determining the next meeting’s readings. Selection of articles was based on participants’ professional areas of work and interests.

During group interviews, participants guided the discussion around the selected texts. This form of open-ended discussion allowed a large and rich amount of data to be generated and usually extended past our scheduled quitting time of 6:00 pm. I guided the discussion during the group interviews with the questions listed in Appendix A. The teachers, however, often took the discussion in directions that went beyond the structure of an interview. In many ways the group interviews became social encounters and a negotiated text (Fontana & Frey, 2005) that shaped
the conversation. The group meetings lasted until February 2006 for a total of eight sessions. During the sessions I took notes, recorded suggestions, and also reflected on the session.

As well a taking field notes, I introduced the practice of audio-taping our meetings early on in the study. It took two sessions for the teachers to decide how often they wanted to meet and what they wanted to read. The participants asked me to summarize each set of readings and to provide a guide through questions that they could consider while reading individually in preparation for the group sessions. See Appendix D and E for examples of a summary of the text and questions for discussion. This method proved fruitful in that it often happened that there was a lapse between the time the teachers had to read the article and when we met to discuss it as a group. It helped to trigger earlier responses and memory of the article.

The Individual Interview

I invited the participants to meet with me individually in between our group meetings to discuss their questions, interest, and engagement with the selected texts. My interview questions guided the discussion. I asked questions related to their professional learning goals and interests. The interview questions prodded their understanding, how they made further connections with the readings, their reflections, and their judgements on the articles they had read (see Appendix A). However, during these conversations we talked about other areas of interest which often extended into the group interviews.

The traveling librarian

I positioned myself as a participant observer, interviewer, and traveling librarian in relation to the six women participants in the study. The teachers brought a wide range of knowledge to the reading process and seemed to easily identify relevant topics for discussion. Early on in the process of determining topics and finding texts, participants were invited to attend a media tutorial to learn how to use the Internet and other databases to search for relevant texts. Two of
the six participants expressed an interesting in attending, but all participants requested that I act as a traveling librarian for them and gather copies of the articles and drop them off at their school or home. The underlying factors were time and access. All participants were working full time. Although there was some Internet access through the local school board’s library system, it was limited. My privilege as a graduate student provided free access to a wide variety of databases through the University of British Columbia libraries.

Method of Analysis

A feminist qualitative methodology was employed in this study. A feminist qualitative methodology advocates how knowledge might be applied in ways that offer possibilities for social change and transformation. This analytical framework positions a critical theory of literacy within a necessary theory of learning. The teacher reading group was structured to provide an experience of learning as a social phenomenon that happens in the context of lived experience and participation in the world (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

After the project group meetings ended, I continued contact with the teachers. I submitted to each participant a copy of my analysis of their interviews, asking for feedback and questions.

I used ATLAS, a qualitative software program, to initially code the data according to three areas of focus: research comprehension, research evaluation, and utilization. I also, coded how each participant talked about their professional goals.

The data used for the analysis of this study was generated from the group sessions and follow up individual interviews which focused mostly on feminists texts and educational research articles.

I used elements of discourse analysis to explore and understand how the participants engaged with the texts. In this dissertation I use the term discourse to signal a dialogical social process embedded in a larger network of verbal-ideological belief systems (Bakhtin, 1986).
One’s speech is a series of interrelated “viewpoints, world views, and trends [that] cross, converge, and diverge in it” (p. 93). This socio-cultural approach to looking at participant conversations recognizes how the participants’ readings of texts are ‘ways of being in the world’; they are ‘forms of life’ (P. Gee, 1996, p. viii). Discursive practices are “always and everywhere social and products of social histories” (p. viii). These social epistemologies shape literacy practices and extend the relationship between the reader and the text as a site for the production of knowledge (Heath, 1983).

In investigating the participants’ responses to the texts, I focused on three areas: comprehension, evaluation, and utilization. I use the term comprehension to frame how the participants used the texts to acknowledge understanding of what they had read by connecting, inferring, questioning, wondering and assimilating these thoughts with new insights.

Evaluation refers to how the participants made judgments on the texts, whether they liked what they read and why; if they considered the topics covered in the articles relevant, and if they would recommend it to anyone else to read and what, if anything else, they might want to read further on the topic.

Utilization refers to how the participants talked about using the text outside of the teacher reading group, whether by passing the text along, or discussing ideas generated within the text with colleagues and peers. I was interested in furthering understanding of how the teachers might apply the knowledge shared in our discussions and how this new knowledge might be applied to their teaching practice.

Using a form of discourse analysis, I present three distinct themes within the study. First the use of social justice discourse in how the teachers talked about the readings; secondly how the study’s form of supported access contributed to the teachers professional conversations about
teaching; and lastly, how this particular study contributed to a social theory of learning for the participants.

Table 3.1
Summary of Group Readings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of Teacher Reading Group</th>
<th>Topic of Discussion/Readings</th>
<th>Teachers Attending</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Session #1 November 26, 2004</td>
<td>Introductory Meeting</td>
<td>Louisa, Dora, Pivoine Jaune</td>
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<tr>
<td>Session #2 January 28, 2005</td>
<td>Open discussion about the process and how the group wanted to proceed</td>
<td>Louisa, Dora</td>
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| Session #3 April 1, 2005     | **Readings:**
|                              | Hooks, bell (1994).        | Louisa, Amanda |
|                              | *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom.* New York Routledge, 1-44. | |
| Session #4 April 29, 2005    | **Readings:**
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<tr>
<td>Session #6</td>
<td>October 14, 2005</td>
<td>Discussion of individual readings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maxine is a teacher/librarian at a large secondary school in Vancouver with over 25 years of experience. She is white and a mother of two children.</td>
<td>04/29, 2005 (ESL/Gender) 07/15/2005 (Review of Readings) 02/06/2006 (Teacher Job Action)</td>
<td>05/13/2005 06/09/2005</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dora is a teacher/counselor with over ten years experience also at a secondary school in Vancouver. She is currently finishing a master’s of counseling program. She is white, unmarried, and no children.</td>
<td>11/26/2004 (Intro meeting) 01/28/2005 (Process discussion) 04/29/2005 (Sexuality, gender, and ESL) 07/15/2005 (Summer recap) 10/27/2005 (ESL/disabilities)</td>
<td>05/09/2005 07/06/2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pivoine Jaune is a multicultural liaison worker working with both elementary and secondary students within urban schools in Vancouver for 16 years. She is Vietnamese, speaks five languages, unmarried, and no children.</td>
<td>11/26/2004 (Intro meeting) 04/29/2005 (Sexuality, gender, and ESL) 07/15/2005 (The future for girls in the future)</td>
<td>07/05/2005 12/11/2005</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended 5/8 sessions.</td>
<td>global economy.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>10/14/2005</td>
<td>(Individual readings update)</td>
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<tr>
<td>02/06/2006 (Teacher job action)</td>
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</table>

| Amanda is an elementary school resource teacher who works predominately with English-as-second-language (ESL) students and has been both a secondary and elementary teacher for 16 years. Amanda is white, married, and no children. |
| 04/01/2005           |
| (Strength of women/feminist pedagogy) |
| 04/29/2005           |
| (Sexuality, gender, and ESL) |
| 02/06/2006           |
| (Teacher job action) |
| 04/28/2005           |
| 06/09/2005           |
| 07/05/2005           |

| Sally is a teacher/counselor at two separate elementary schools in the Lower Mainland of Vancouver, with five years experience. She white, unmarried, and no children. |
| 04/29/2005           |
| (Sexuality, gender, and ESL) |
| 10/14/2005           |
| (Individual readings update) |
| 05/23/2005           |
| 06/30/2005           |

| Attended 2/8 sessions. | 02/06/2006 (Teacher job action) |

| 02/06/2006 (Teacher job action) |
Chapter 4

The Discourse of Social Justice Within a Teacher Reading Group

This chapter is the first of three chapters that analyzes the data generated throughout the study. This chapter extends the discussion of Chapter one on reading in the public sphere by examining the extent to which the teacher reading group contributed to a form of political praxis. I summarize the work of several key philosophers’ conception of the public sphere: Jurgen Habermas, Hannah Arendt, and Nancy Fraser, as a way to frame how we might think of the public sphere in relationship to the institutional discursive frameworks of education and critical teaching practice.

Feminist pedagogue Carmen Luke (1992), cites the public sphere, citizenship, democracy, and emancipation as central assumptions of critical pedagogy (p. 27). I argue in this chapter that the teachers found a form of praxis in their discussions of the readings that created conversations that contested the official discourse within the public sphere of teaching.

By looking at three examples of how the participants engaged in a discourse of social justice, I ask if there was evidence of learning and engagement through reading that contributed to a revitalization of thinking and acting for the teachers.

I look at a discussion amongst the participants about the role of media, specifically a corporately driven discourse on educating for the future, an exploration of the gendering of computer cultures and school, and finally, a discussion about how teachers can create inclusive
spaces in education for queer⁴ students and teachers. I argue that these discussions are evidence of how the teachers in this study found meaningful political praxis and the occasion to rethink how public knowledge within a professional learning community can revitalize teacher professional learning.

The Public Sphere

The public sphere defined by Jurgen Habermas (1981/1987) is a conceptual framework for a practice of moral and social democracy through a theory of communicative action. This critical social theory presents a rational and deliberative model of speech that is necessary for creating an effective political realm. Ingrained in the concept of communicative action, the use of language is oriented to reaching understanding that takes on systemic tasks (p. 397).

For Arendt, the public sphere constituted two distinct phenomena: i) appearance, which constitutes reality, and ii) the public that signifies the world itself, a place common to humanity (1958/1996, p. 50). She noted that action is the most important aspect of political activity and that “space of public appearance” is the public realm in which that action takes place. Arendt stated that “action alone is the exclusive prerogative of man [sic]; neither a beast nor a god is capable of it” (p. 22). As important to that action is the presence of other people, who determine the space as truly public. In sheer human togetherness the public sphere is formed. “Wherever men come together, in whatever numbers, public interests come into play, the public realm is formed” (Arendt, 1965/1994, p. 10). It is in the subjectivity of one’s own singular experience, Arendt claimed, that imprisoned the human condition:

   Humanity is never acquired in solitude and never by giving one’s work to the public. It can be achieved only by one who has thrown his life and his person into the public realm.

   (Arendt, 1965/1994, p. 22)

⁴ I use the term queer to expand how we define sexualities.

48
Within the public realm, Arendt (1965/1994) distinguishes between speaking as a form and speaking as an action. She stated that in addition to speech, action is the moment of beginning:

We start something. We weave our strand into a network of relations. What comes of it we never know. This venture is only possible when there is trust in people. (p. 23).

The Latin term vita activa, which translates as “a life devoted to public-political matters” is at the heart of Arendt’s political principles p. 12 (1958/1996). For Arendt (1969), language is as important as birth itself because it provides the ability to act as a political being. Language is what propels us into the world and into relationships with others:

It enables him [sic] to get together with his peers, to act in concert, and to reach out for goals and enterprises that would never enter his mind, let alone the desires of his heart, had he not been given this gift – to embark on something new. (p. 82)

Habermas (1992) also takes up the importance of language in his conceptualization of speech acts as a discursive practice in the public sphere. Language is a necessary component of democratic theory outside of formal state institutions and systems.

Critiquing Habermas’ notion of the public sphere, Nancy Fraser extends the concept of the public sphere to redress those interests that historically have been outside the bourgeois masculinist ideology; those ideas labeled as private and inadmissible (Fraser, 1997, p. 92).

Habermas’ public sphere is a discursive arena “conceptually distinct from the state” as well as from the “official-economy” (p. 70). Fraser’s definition of the public sphere has three distinct areas: “the state, the official economy of paid employment, and arenas of public discourse” (p. 70). Fraser argued that to conflate the public sphere into one area is to miss the analytical complexities of these distinctions, although Habermas’ theory of a social action is seen through a

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5 I have kept Arendt’s exclusively male references as a reflection of her time, but note the importance of the political subject as identifiable across not just sex difference but race, ability, sexuality, location and class.
form of communicative practice that Fraser asserted crosses all three conceptually distinct areas; essential for a democratic theory to work effectively.

Fraser also asserts that there is a lack of gender subtext within the constructs and power relations of Habermas’ systems model. His system does not recognize the internally dualized and gendered elements of late capitalist welfare systems which is a reification of another form of male dominance (Fraser, 1984, p. 122). Fraser suggested that the distinction between a society that accepts and fosters multiple contesting spheres is egalitarian and multicultural, whereas a singular public sphere creates a stratified society between dominant and subordinate groups.

Fraser’s critique and reconceptualization of the public sphere recognizes the need for redress of subordinate groups’ interests; and Habermas’ and Arendt’s understanding of the importance of language in empowering people to communicate across differences provides a rich context to consider how a teacher’s reading group might act as an arena of public discourse in education, capable of political action.

The Discourse of Political Action

The teachers were interested in reading media articles about their recent job action. This became an opportunity for them to revisit the political discourse that surrounded the teacher strike in the media. During our group on February 6, 2006, Louisa commented on the discourse of the ‘bad teacher’. She challenges how the media could redress this discourse by addressing the complexity of teachers’ roles and responsibilities:

It’s so easy to criticize educators and education because everybody has their, what they think their experience [is] going through school. They didn’t have the best educator...they always had a bad educator growing up... [these] stories have been out for years and years and years, it’s what’s going on in, you know...and everybody’s version of you know, the bad educator, the lousy educator...but it’s really hard for the media to
actually dig into the stories and find out what the real issues are. They may actually have
to think about it and actually do some real research. (Group interview, February 6, 2006)

Louisa recognized the power of media discourse in shaping the political outcome of the teacher
strike and the vulnerability she felt as a teacher in how the discourse played out:

But it was interesting paying attention to these [media] articles as they were happening. I
think we were all running home, well cause we were in the morning shift, running home
to the noon news to see what had happened during the day because we knew, well at
some point, I think most people figured out that the media was on our side. But you never
knew when they were going to turn. At least I felt that... it was great that they were and
you watched the news really carefully and you sent a sigh of relief another day where
they’re still on our side, but you never knew at what point. And there were a couple of
times there they wavered...like when Jenny made a mistake about the numbers and little
things like that where you thought they were just going to turn on you... and it was going
to just all crumble. It was really volatile and really, really vulnerable. (Group interview,
February 6, 2006)

Louisa was cognizant of competing discourses surrounding the teachers’ job action and how
competing interests shaped the media discourses:

I don’t think it’s a corrupt media, I think it’s just opportunistic media. It’s just like it
takes the opportunity, whatever they think is going to work for their story at that time, is
what they will tell the story of. They are not loyal to anybody...We could actually look at
it and say, oh yeah, okay that’s what happened, is that what really happened? (Group
interview, February 6, 2006)

During this same group discussion, Amanda defined the media discourse as a way of polarizing
people by generating hatred and fear:
Amanda: It’s almost like one is united against the other...we’re all going to be friends and hate that guy over there. Do you know what I mean? It kind of draws you tighter and I think that in BC [British Columbia] that there is a bit of that as well. The people that are not part of Gordon Campbell’s [provincial premier] crew and those that are...The people maybe this time they assumed that perhaps we [the teachers] were right because they know how wrong he often is perhaps, do you what I mean, it’s sort of like, am I going to trust Gordon Campbell...or am I going to trust...the honorable teacher? (Group interview, February 6, 2006)

Amanda defined this discourse as the ability “to all hate together - we become much closer.” She saw the media discourse as a “game” that likes to “scare people or make them feel...unbalanced.” The media coverage of the teacher strike reminded her of “how you have to find out yourself; there’s ways to look for the real news. You have to have some time” (Group interview, February 6, 2006).

Resisting the Corporate Discourse of Schooling

Maxine began a discussion about teaching critical thinking. She had recently been at a panel presentation at a nearby university. The panel consisted of a filmmaker, Joe Bakan of documentary The Corporation, (Achbar, M., Simpson, B., Abbott, J., & Bakan, J., 2004), a professor from the education faculty, and a teacher librarian. In response to the presentation, Maxine and Amanda share a dialogue about the role of teachers in creating critical thinkers:

Maxine: The educator...he was far less critical, far less radical in how he imagined we as educators could teach the critical thinking...[The educator on the panel]...seemed to have accepted that teachers aren’t going to do this, they’re not going to critically... challenge...People were much more excited listening to the lawyer-writer [film maker]...and yet I think a lot of us have heard, and maybe some have bought into the idea that well you
know you can’t be, you can’t be too controversial. You can’t be political in the classroom. I don’t buy that but I do believe that there are definitely people who are uncomfortable, who won’t do it for fear of the backlash in the community and yet I think there is a place for it and I think that it’s a shame that we haven’t done more to support and encourage teachers’ voices.

Amanda: I guess yeah, it makes some sense I suppose when you think of...the parents being upset if the teacher is talking politics, their own personal politics.

Maxine: But teaching kids to critically examine not just to accept. In some way you have to be able to do that and model it yourself, you have to be able to set that out as acceptable as an important thing to do. He [Joe Bakan] was talking about the corporate consumer, the children and their Nike logos and the...kind of critical examination of the effects it’s having on children’s lives and our teaching...I would say critical thinking is off the agenda, it’s not taught in schools anymore, it’s not a big deal, we don’t hear it. We hear literacy, social responsibility and that’s about not...questioning the dominant order at all.

Louisa: Yeah and that’s radical now.

Maxine: Yeah, we’re producing children as nice little automatons.

Louisa: Yeah.

Maxine: Who will do as they’re told and be nice to eachother—nicey nice?

Louisa: And be socially responsible.

Maxine: Emotionally intelligent.

(Group interview, February 6, 2006).

This conversation between the teachers seems to indicate an awareness of the impact of educational discourse on their practice. Taking risks in talking to students about controversial
issues puts them at risk of parental disapproval. They also seemed to understand the doublespeak and contradictory meaning in the use of buzz words like emotional intelligence and social responsibility.

Maxine and I continued to discuss the need to interrogate this kind of economically driven discourse in education during one of our individual interviews. We were discussing her impressions from the articles “What Happens to the Girls? Gender, Work and Learning in Canada’s New Economy,” (Fenwick, 2004) and “Girl Talk: Gender, Equity, and Identity Discourse in a School-Based Computer Culture” (Jenson, De Castell, & Bryson, 2003):

[Information literacy] empowers kids to make optimal use of the multiple sources available to them. If what makes it work is the employers, the business council believes that this is the goal of the future, that’s great because we use it in the empowerment of our kids, but it can’t be the only reason we do it...[we need to] question the authority that’s sort of saying this is what you need to do to be successful. (Individual interview, June 9, 2005).

Maxine resists a corporately driven educational agenda as she reflects on her role as a teacher/librarian:

There’s a certain amount of discomfort that I’m living out somebody else’s agenda. I passionately believe that it’s important to make our kids competitive, that we’re equipping them to deal with the realities of what they’re going to face in work and in their personal lives. In their post secondary education I want our kids to be as good as everyone else’s kids—to have the same advantages—but I’ve still got that sort of nagging question of who’s telling me I should do this and to whose benefit is this? Is this solely about our kids or is it that we’re dancing to the agenda of business? (Individual interview, June 9, 2005)
Maxine comments on what she understands as the gendering of how knowledge is shared and used within the computer culture of her school. As a female leader of technology in her school, she discussed the challenges she has faced:

When you watch what happens with women who “lead in technology” - I’m putting that in quotation marks because it’s very difficult to do that in a landscape that has been largely male and I’m talking now at the professional level, the teacher’s level - and what the different values are that might be inherent in the discussion that reflects different sets of understanding. The observation I have sometimes around who owns the expertise and what you do with that expertise. I think the women here who had moved ahead in technology in this school have done so with the notion of sharing - sharing ideas, sharing equipment - and that’s not totally a gendered discussion because there are people who share that idea about gender. But there’s also a core group that see it as this set of skills that belong unto the person and are divied out within well defined parameters.

Knowledge, technology knowledge is a possession rather than a body of information to be shared. The analogy I’ve used is like wearing programs the same way you might wear notches in a gun belt. (Individual interview, June 9, 2005)

Not comfortable wearing notches in her gun belt of technology, Maxine defined the use of technology as a commodity. She expressed the importance of sharing knowledge as a nurturing process that happens both locally and within a wider context of her district area of education. She conceptualized a bigger vision of her teacher librarian role:

[It is] very much around sharing and how do we build these networks along which the sharing gets done and breaks down some of those patterns…when it’s used incorrectly and withheld - if there is an inclination to withhold it - the passwords are put on and it’s still…a kind of power thing. (Individual interview, June 9, 2005)
Maxine considered the sharing of knowledge about technology as a kind of process learning both for the teachers and the students:

It’s a relationship amongst us where learning has to be much more lateral, you have to do a lot more of the sharing of the knowledge in order to nurture other people along rather than that more traditional role of, ‘Here, I’m a educator and I decide what you can know and when you can know it’. (Individual interview, June 9, 2005)

Maxine’s expressions about her role and responsibility as an educator reflects a discourse of social justice. The two articles (Fenwick, 2004 & Jensen, et. al., 2003) prompt her to address the issue of equity within the context of her school’s computer culture as well as her wider educational district. Maxine articulates the importance of building relationships and sharing information rather than just “planning how do we get computers into schools” (Individual interview, June 9, 2005).

Maxine extends her understanding of technology, gender and equity by pointing out the intersection of other kinds of oppression:

The socio-economic issue...kids who were somehow on the wrong side of the divide...bigger issues of poverty or perhaps ability. (Individual interview, June 9, 2005)

Maxine’s understanding of equity across multiple differences is woven into her articulation of what it means to create a more balanced learning environment for her students through computer use:

But when you talk about general access and you make it more readily available and you don’t isolate it into labs and call it computer science and it appears to be more balanced landscapes and you watch kids here working on projects that have integrated technology [and] there’s usually a nice kind of feel to that, everybody’s engaged, they like the creative, they like the movement of the learning. (Individual interview, June 9, 2005)
Maxine envisions her role as teacher librarian in the larger context of education:

We [teacher librarians] are at the heart of the network of classrooms that’s connected now globally, connected to the broader community as well as the internal connection, so in terms of the role that I’d like to see the library play, that’s the kind of understanding I would like to be able to share, and have those kinds of discussions and the e-collaborations, those e-collaborations are possible I suppose in the future although everybody is so busy that I think it’s a pipe dream you know [laughs]. (Individual interview, June 9, 2005)

Whether a pipe dream or not, Maxine’s contribution to this study shows the need to share information within a changing technological environment. The readings prompted her to critique the educational discourse around what it means to integrate technology into one’s teaching. Maxine reminds teachers of the importance of sharing information across multiple levels of knowledge and expertise. Maxine tells us how important sharing of knowledge is in creating a future of thinking, caring human beings.

Schooling Sexualities

Snow (2002) postulated the importance of reading comprehension as constructing meaning within a social and cultural context. Dora used the Nelson (1999) article, “Sexual Identities in ESL: Queer Theory and Classroom Inquiry” to signal the complexity of creating safe and respectful learning environments for queer students. She discussed with the group the importance of talking about different kinds of sexualities across cultures within a large urban high school. Dora finds “hard to imagine” the disclosure amongst the queer students quoted in the article:

When you think how hard it is for a kid born and raised here to even be questioning their own sexuality here and instead you put all of that into a kid who comes from somewhere
else and living in a different culture, that is just excruciating. (Group interview, April 29, 2005)

Dora questions how teachers might engage students in these discussions. She reflects on her own pedagogical practices:

I’ve talked to a couple of kids who graduated and kind of came out and what that was like, [I was] trying to get a sense of what you could do different for kids…It’s still hard for them and needing to really feel safe. The ones who did tell [me, they were] feeling guarded about who they told. So even in the classroom if you start to, of course incorporating the language and all of that, how much does that really impact how safe that kid feels, especially when you are dealing with pretty entrenched cultural attitudes with the classmates or peers? That is really hard. I think it puts those kids more at risk really, more isolated. (Group interview, April 29, 2005)

Dora demonstrates the value in constructing knowledge within the social-cultural context of her school. Her previous experiences in working with queer and questioning students enriches the context of the articles under discussion.

Pivoine Jaune extends the discussion about sexuality to include Chinese culture:

“There’s no way, it’s taboo. You don’t talk about that. There are still a lot of issues in Asia we don’t want to admit” (Group interview, April 29, 2005).

Louisa recalls a situation with another colleague who was anxious about addressing a transgendered student in her classroom:

Do you remember those couple of kids that Beth [teacher colleague] had at the beginning of the year, and there was all that anxiety about whether they were male or female and what [teachers] were going to say in the classroom. (Group interview, April 29, 2005)
Dora continues to invite discussion on the topic by sharing her own question about how to confront parents who are homophobic:

Parents coming in and having concerns about the sexuality of the educator. Would they come in and say I want my son/daughter out of that class? (Group interview, April 29, 2005).

Dora shares her experiences of professional learning by discussing a recent workshop she had attended:

But it was quite interesting because the whole topic was about inclusion and that seems to be a big thing from the school board as well. It made sense and talking even about that educator who had the [sex] change but not only needing to support that educator but the staff and the kids too...What was done for the staff?...It is a really complicated thing. (Group interview, April 29, 2005)

Dora identified the complexity of such a situation but also the importance of looking at the interrelation between how the teachers and staff learn about issues of inclusion. She questions how to create similar spaces and opportunities for discussion in their classrooms. She calls this a kind of pedagogy that "filters down to the kids" (Group interview, April 29, 2005)

The teacher reading group became a place of inquiry that propelled the discussion towards more specific questions relevant to the context of the group members. Dora encouraged feedback and input from others in an exchange of ideas and dialogue. She continued to reflect on her experience:

That’s one thing in the scenarios we ran that day...real life scenarios. The resource teacher is a lesbian and the parent comes in and says my kid will not be in that teacher’s class, or whatever, the science teacher. What do you do? It was really complicated. There
were lots of questions. [Pivoine Jaune] what do you think about that? Would that be something you would deal with?

Dora’s openness to creating genuine dialogue seemed to create the space for new discursive constructions of knowledge within the context of the articles on gender and sexuality.

Reading in the Public Sphere of Education

The teachers generated new interpretations of the reading by asking each other questions. A discourse of social justice was apparent in how they discussed creating inclusive spaces for queer kids in their classrooms. The teachers engaged each other through discussions of support for queer students and teachers. Through a dialogic process of interpretation of the readings they deepened understanding of social inclusion across differences of experience and culture. The teachers’ discussions also deepened understanding about shared learning through technology.

Political praxis began with the teachers constructing and reconstructing the discourse of social justice through their dialogue. They challenged the authority of media discourse and the corporate discourse of education. They exchanged ideas and asked tough questions about sexuality and culture showing the ability of teachers to nurture compassionate and humane responses to social differences.

Work in the area of multiliteracies recognizes that we need to design our learning spaces to include the complexities of our school communities: “As people are simultaneously members of multiple lifeworlds, so their identities have multiple layers that are in complex relation to each other” (Group, 2000, p. 17). The critical discussion shown by the teachers in this study supports Fraser’s notion of the need for multiple public spheres within a democratic society. The teachers’ conversations about equity and inclusivity reflects a political vibrancy and promises new possibilities for teaching learning as praxis. Silence or absence within the public sphere is
Hannah Arendt’s (1969) definition of a sign of dehumanization within our culture. Learning to dialogue through a teacher reading group, is perhaps one way of “finding how to get to the new place where we can all live and speak to each other for more than a fragile moment” (Pratt, 1984, p. 14) within the public sphere of teacher learning and education.
Chapter 5

Supported Access to Knowledge and Its Impact on Teacher Conversations.

In this chapter I analyze how this study’s form of supported access to knowledge contributed to the participants’ professional conversations about teaching. As previously stated, the purpose of this study was to investigate how supported access to scholarly texts, which was not otherwise readily available to the participants, might create intellectual engagement and professional development within educator communities of practice.

Chris Weedon (1987) hypothesized the “importance of making theory accessible and of the political importance of transforming the material conditions of knowledge production and women’s access to knowledge” as necessary elements of the feminist project (p. 7). My investigation is situated within a larger study committed to improving public and professional access to research and scholarship (Willinsky, 2006). John Willinsky (2006) suggests how reading research on-line can be more useful to the common reader (p. 157). He postulates the need to increase public access to on-line research and scholarship in order to provide people with “an opportunity to explore a new world of ideas that they may have only suspected existed” (p. 113).

The use of computer technologies and the Internet has reconfigured how we access knowledge. In the context of access to scholarly research, John Willinsky (2006) says: “The public’s right of access to this knowledge is not something that people have to earn. It is grounded in a basic right to know” (p. 125). Educators’ basic right to know and access public research related to their professional learning has become in many ways a complex and regulated process. The gatekeeping practices of publishing houses limits who can afford to buy subscriptions to academic journals. This chapter presents evidence of the value in making research texts available within a supported reading environment for teachers.
The notion of *supported access* to information or knowledge (with no special distinction made in this thesis between these two concepts) refers to the role that I played in providing reading materials to the participants around topics that they had collectively agreed upon. I became a sort of traveling librarian for the teachers. I took advantage of my privilege as a student at the University of British Columbia to search for and find research and other sorts of articles and texts that matched areas of interest identified by the participants.

Looking at the use of research and other texts informed by the access principle, Willinsky (2006) explored how this support is useful for educators in terms of how they might engage in intellectual life. I also use *supported access* more broadly in this thesis however, by examining how the Internet and World Wide Web can provide various forms of information texts useful to professional learning settings.

My role as the group librarian provided *supported access* in a number of ways. I located and distributed articles to the participants. As stated, I was able to draw freely from the electronic resources from the nearby university library of which I was a member.

My initial hope in beginning the study was that the participants would be keen to be involved in learning how to search for research. I envisioned that part of my role would be to share with them how to use the Internet. I had also envisioned working with them in testing a reading support tool on-line (as part of this larger study by John Willinsky), in an effort to further understand how such tools can assist teachers in their use of and access to scholarly texts. Early on in the process, all of the teachers requested that I locate the information for them, which clearly established my role of group librarian. This role helped to sustain the reading group. The teachers felt that they did not have enough time to locate the articles, but seemed eager to commit a significant amount of personal time to the readings and interviews.
All six participants were keen for me to find them more articles based on their individual interests, indicating another use of my role as group librarian. These related texts were useful in providing participants with more focused support in areas related to their professional practices and school contexts.

This chapter discusses Pivoine Jaune, Sally, Louisa, and Amanda's experience of supported access. I present evidence of how a supported reading environment provided the opportunity for them to engage in conversations that contributed new information and insights about professional issues within their school communities. I examine their perceptions and comments about this study's process and the use of reading research materials as a form of teacher learning.

A Bridge Between Two Cultures

Because Pivoine Jaune (which translates Yellow Peony) was a multicultural worker, she brought a unique element to the project. She had worked with immigrant families for over 16 years in this particular school board. She started out as a Multi-lingual Staff Associate in 1989 at an urban reception and orientation centre for new families.

Pivoine Jaune's current job requires an intense amount of student, educator, and parent interaction. She speaks a total of five languages (Mandarin, Cantonese, French, Vietnamese, and English) and is an avid reader and member of a French book club.

In talking about her current professional goals, Pivoine Jaune described a project she had created at an elementary school. This project offers new immigrant kindergarten students classroom support once a week. Pivoine Jaune assists the teacher by communicating information to the student in their first language. Pivoine sees her role as an important bridge between school and the immigrant students' home cultures:
Because of my job I'm moving in and out from one culture to another so I'm more sensitive to details [of culture]...how can I say, I consider myself like a bridge between two cultures. Sometimes it's very frustrating because they never have family life in China for so many generation, everybody was separated. [It’s] going to take a long time to put that back into focus. (Individual interview, July 5, 2005)

When I ask Pivoine Jaune what, if any other topics, she would like to read more about, she requested information about China, specifically about the status of women. She thought this information would help her to better understand her students:

Pivoine Jaune: Yeah—I think something like this one [Good Women of China: Hidden Voices, (Ran, 2002), a book she had been reading] really interests me and also because I [can] read something [that] is happening, it’s still up to date.

Sarah: Okay

Pivoine Jaune: And [it] also help[s] me in my job

Sarah: Right

Pivoine Jaune: Like for how to deal with my students

Sarah: Okay

Pivoine Jaune: Because now I [have] a bigger group [of students]

Sarah: So current stuff about what’s happening in China?

Pivoine Jaune: In China, especially [for] the woman.

Pivoine Jaune’s request for additional readings expanded her knowledge of China which further enriched the group interviews. She extended discussions during our group interviews by sharing knowledge from these additional readings:

I’ve been reading that book about women [The Good Women of China] and the article that...is related about one child policy [“Fresh Winds in Beijing: Chinese Feminists
Speak Out on the One-Child Policy and Women’s Lives” (Greenhalgh, 2002)] (Group interview, October 14, 2005).

Pivoine Jaune shared from these readings when she responded to a question Louisa posed:

Louisa: Yeah, when did that whole breakdown happen with the family in China?
Pivoine Jaune: Well it is because there is only one child and the policy...
Louisa: So in the last twenty years?
Pivoine Jaune: Yeah, and then usually six adults take care of one kid or just leave him alone and he will do whatever he likes. And sometimes I saw on the movie the same [thing]. The parents work, are so busy. They stay in China and the grandparents take care of him. They never really have time together. So it is hard for them when they come here. (Group interview, April 29, 2005).

Pivoine Jaune’s professional experience working with Chinese immigrant families in relationship with her knowledge from the current texts acted as a pivot to explore cultural differences that the teachers were struggling with in their schools.

Pivoine Jaune contributed another dimension of understanding from the readings on the one child policy in China by sharing her personal experience growing up in Chinese traditions:

Something I want to talk about, the one child policy, some women find it good for them because they get liberated, not being bound to so many children so they can get some time away from them to do other things than being a mom. You see, just I’m thinking about my mom, she was always envious. She had gone through 13 pregnancies but for her, children are just too much. She’d say you’re so lucky to be born in this generation and you can choose to become what you like to be, be single or have the number of children that you want. Not like her time, during her time, her generation everybody have 8 children, 10 children, it’s terrible. (Group interview, October 14, 2005)
Pivoine Jaune’s commentary within the reading group continues to deepen understanding between herself and the teachers about elements of Chinese culture. Her discussion of the article “Women’s Political Participation in China: Struggling to Hold up Half the Sky” (Howell, 2002), enriches the historical and political context of the group’s conversation about women’s role in China. Pivoine Jaune brings a critical lens to the discussion. She tells the group about the origins of one of the article titles she has read: “This is Mao [who invented the phrase women holding up half the sky]...that’s what he said, but he didn’t think the woman can do that. He had no respect for women” (Group interview, October 14, 2005).

Pivoine Jaune talked passionately about her role as a multicultural worker. She defined herself as a bridge of understanding between the students and the school. She understood the opportunity of this kind of supported learning giving her greater professional efficacy:

For now I kind of have [a] dependency to read more about China because I have so many families coming and I have to deal with them, you know see [them] daily. So I think it’s important for me to find out the journey that they went through before they arrived here, so I can get into hav[ing] a better understanding [of] where they’re coming from. (Individual interview, July 5, 2005)

She described reading the research texts as a way to “get more insight” about new families from China. Pivoine Jaune valued the usefulness of reading research and how it contributed to a more “forceful” learning process for her in relationship to her day to day working reality:

I think the research ha[s] some value...because they also interview different people or they do it in a different way than a novel. Fiction [is] the idea of the author, not really as reality. If you do a research of a case study it’s more forceful. (Individual interview, Dec 11, 2005)
Linking the research texts and her work, Pivoine Jaune stated: “My job is the reality, right? You see the one case after the other”.

Reading texts of any kind in isolation from a relational understanding of what roles educators and multicultural workers play in bridging the gaps between cultures is understood by Pivoine Jaune:

If you just hang on to research all the time [it] can be very dry. We can talk to [teachers], we can have a workshop or a panel or just casual discussion talking about [students’] lives [and] what we [multicultural workers] are doing every day. (Individual interview Dec 11, 2005).

Including key players, such as multicultural educators, expands and enriches the discussions within teachers’ communities practice. Within the complex urban multicultural setting of this project’s particular professional learning community, Pivoine Jaune’s contribution created a rich environment for questions and insight about immigrant families.

Pivoine Jaune continued to utilize my role as the traveling librarian by requesting more articles “about family life in China after the Communist party [came] into power.” I delivered two more articles (Lui & Tein, 2005; Sullivan, 2005) to Pivoine Jaune. Soon after the study ended, Pivoine Jaune and I met again. She told me she had found the perfect book to help her understand the many questions she had about her Chinese immigrant students. Her continued interest in learning signaled her engagement in this kind of supported reading within her professional learning community.

Pivoine Jaune’s commitment to learning included an engagement with the teachers that valued new interpretations and rethinking of experiences in context of the articles on women and families in China. Pivoine Jaune taught me the importance of learning and reading between the seams of personal histories, stories, and the day to day challenges of work in public education.
Mistakes that Inspire Learning

Sally attended two of the eight group sessions and we conducted two individual interviews. In discussing her professional goals, she took the time to tell me about her journey through teaching up until this point: “I’m a teacher counselor, I’ve been teaching for 5 years and of those 5 years, 2 years as an elementary school counselor. I love what I do” (Individual interview, May 23, 2005).

Sally was currently enrolled in a Master of Counseling program at the local university. She talked about wanting to find collaboration with colleagues in her new role:

My own professional goals for me, this job is really new for me as a school counselor and what I really want to improve on is learning. I’m in this job and it’s really isolating and I don’t have a lot of access to other colleagues...right now it’s the beginning stages of my new job, new career, I am really concerned about having that colleague consultation cause I’m feeling isolated at times. (Individual interview, May 23, 2005)

Sally continued to talk about her goals, primarily how she might take care of herself outside of work. Balancing workload and developing professional skills within their area of specialization is also a common and challenging problem for most new teachers:

There’s a lot of micro goals that I have for myself for this job in terms of improving my own skills as a counselor, you know, I learned skills in the training program but in the day to day I think life skills in terms of managing myself, my time, my outside of work time, is something that I’m learning to. (Individual interview, May 23, 2005)

The schools where Sally worked as a teacher counselor were located in the more impoverished areas of the city with large immigrant populations and students who generally face barriers to
educational success. Sally grew up in the city and talked about the need to understand the diversity and complexity of areas of the city that she found herself working in:

Another professional goal for me, I grew up in Vancouver and I thought I knew this city really well, but in reflection, I grew up in one part of the city, so it’s really been an interesting experience to be working all over the city and having a different or a new flavour of you know, different pockets, different communities and knowing what’s out there. (Individual interview, May 23, 2005)

Sally attended one group sessions before our first individual interview and reflected on the value of sharing with colleagues in a directed reading environment:

I think it’s really valuable to sort of have a chance to talk with colleagues about things that are sometimes, I mean we do speak to colleagues and it could be on topics that are not, you know are very unfocused, and I think to be able to take some kind of material and have a focus in an environment that’s not like if you’re mandated to do something, people tend to look at it a bit differently but when it’s a voluntary type of group and you have a focus that you can sort of go back on—it’s open. (Individual interview, May 23, 2005)

Sally and I discussed her interests in looking at studies and practical handbooks/articles that might give suggestions for the prevention of cyberbullying. This was a problem in one of her schools. After reading the articles she reflected:

In [my] school…we’re going to have a committee. I’m like how to solve it and yet you can’t just [solve the problem] in a committee, you have to involve people, parents, and the kids themselves. (Group interview, October 14, 2006)

She summarizes the key elements of one of the articles (Superhighway Safety):

70
Well I got these articles thanks to you on cyber-bullying. I really want to thank you because at that time, at the end of the year last year, we had some sort of individual cases of you know children being on-line and being quite, you know aggressive and making up rumors and talking about children...behind their backs. The one article that I remember... brought it up and it...it was like a magazine article [with] tips...like practical sort of ideas. It talked about and something that you know in schools, the isolation. We [just the school] can’t really target this problem of cyber-bullying. It has to be something where parents and the community, the other stakeholders, need to be behind it because at a school it’s really hard to control or monitor things that are happening outside of school. (Group Interview, October 14, 2005).

Sally talked about giving one of the articles (Network, 2005) to her colleagues. Instead she used a reference to the article to begin a conversation with her peer:

I had thought about distributing it to other teachers and I showed it [to] 2 male teachers who I know have an interest in technology and are concerned. I just had a discussion about that and what their thoughts are...to let them know that I’m interested in it as well too and I’m not dismissing it and that something should be done about it. (Group interview, October 14, 2005)

Reading about theory helped Sally to start reflecting on her own practice:

It’s just as valuable as the practical information cause that’s where things sort of start, it’s a place for ideas, they’re just ideas, and I think that they’re key. That’s the starting point and then the practical comes from that. I find that kind of stuff interesting and useful. (Individual interview, June 30, 2005)

For Sally, the new ideas and information had to be specific to her professional context. She recognized that finding ways to talk about those ideas nurtured her strong sense of professional
service to her students. She valued the project because it generated a focus through the supported and directed reading environment. Sally’s engagement in the project was seen in how she discussed the value of reading and sharing “practical stuff” like the cyberbullying article with her colleagues. Sally was also comfortable questioning assumptions and not having all the answers.

Creative Curriculum Development

Louisa had been a secondary school educator for 28 years at the time of this study. She had worked as an Art, Social Studies, and English educator and taught for 2 years in Japan. Louisa, currently was a department head of English as Second Language (ESL) instruction at a large inner city school in the city, described her classes as “95% Chinese.”

She shared her professional goals with me in our earliest individual interview: “I think a big one is to...I mean it’s practical...to try and help my students to be successful when they get into a more mainstream class and that’s my main goal, and it doesn’t necessarily relate to just subject matter” (Individual interview, April 26, 2005).

Louisa, as one of six participants, attended all eight teacher reading group interviews and met with me for three individual interviews. Louisa predicted how involvement with the study would expand her reading interests: “I’m still a little unsure where we’re going-but I’m open...and I think it’ll just-it’ll be an opportunity for me to read more and read things that I would not normally have read” (Individual interview, April 26, 2005).

As well as reading the agreed-upon group texts, Louisa requested that I find her additional resources to develop a new unit study for her Level II ESL students. The supported reading contributed to her evolving interest in research and gave her new ideas for her pedagogical practices. She requested articles on feminist teaching practices in other countries and also became interested in researching student revolutions. I used my access to a university library to find an article on feminist teaching practice in Japan entitled, “Women’s Studies and
Louisa was very excited to talk to me about the Fujimura-Fanselow (1996) article:

I liked it [the article] because I think I can relate it to my troublesome level 2 who are going to be level 3s next year and the idea that I think one of their problems is not [that] I couldn’t relate to them cause they weren’t getting their work done and there’s no motivation at that level...I think if I use some of these techniques, I realize that maybe they have similar feelings about my teaching style. Not that I’m lecturing them but the idea that they expect me to have all the answers. (Individual interview, July 10, 2005)

Reading about another teacher’s experience of teaching ESL students (Fujimura-Fanselow, 1996) seemed to resonate with Louisa:

When I read this I thought, “Ooh.” The lights came on. They should have anyway I should have known, but you know how you get reminded of things?” (Individual interview, July 10, 2005).

Louisa wanted to utilize some of the author’s ideas in her own teaching:

She did things like asking them to question the articles at the beginning: What do you think you’re going to be reading about? So that before you give them something they have to anticipate...and get them to create the questions rather than the teacher giving questions to the students about their reading assignments. They create questions first and give them to eachother. So she talked about things like that, about she’s doing things like that, giving certain people roles in the class. I’m going to try and use some of these techniques. (Individual interview, July 10, 2005)
Later in the interview, she talked about utilizing the article with her colleagues: “Yeah, I’m probably going to show this in my department” (Individual interview, July 10, 2005).

Louisa showed interest in the teaching techniques suggested by inquiring how she might apply them to in a culturally relevant way to her Chinese students: “So it would be interesting to see if this connects to China in some ways” (Individual interview, July 10, 2005).

As the study progressed over a fifteen month period, Louisa decided she wanted to create and deliver a new curriculum for her ESL students. Her reflections and questions about how to more fully engage her students informed the process she used to design the unit. She explained this during one of our group interviews:

Well I’ve been reading about Tiananmen Square. Well it all started with my level II ESL group—95% Chinese—who I figured weren’t really connecting with learning, especially learning English. So I thought maybe if we did something that, so it’s connected then to their home country…that would also connect on, you know, to Canada. (Group interview, October 13, 2005)

She explained to the group her research process:

I was reading about Tiananmen Square so I thought maybe that would be an interesting place to-to start… I thought I would start with just revolutions in general—just civil disobedience, so that they [the students] wouldn’t feel that it was something, that I wasn’t attacking China or criticizing it in any way. So I found some stuff on the Internet on like Kent University and another one. Now I can’t remember the names of it, it’s at school. Because I did this 15 months ago on… one of the South American countries where there was a big revolution where a bunch of people got killed by trying to just state their opinion to the government and it ended up being this big fiasco where people got killed. They’re very similar situations. So I picked 2 or 3 different countries and kind of
some research on that. So that’s where I’m going to start with them. (Group interview, October 13, 2005)

Louisa was already engaged in this topic of interest before the study began. Discussions during our individual interviews and during this group interview indicates how the study nurtured her already existing interest and how she utilized this form of supported reading to not just think about her pedagogical practices, but to create a new curriculum:

You got me some great stuff on it. The one that was really good is this one called *Bringing Down the Wall* [1991]. I liked it specifically because it has a lot of letters that were written to Fung [name unclear], who was one of the guys that ended up being protected in the American Embassy for a year. He ran to the embassy. He was not at Tiananmen Square, he was actually at the university at the time and he ended up in the Embassy for a year and then he got out and ended up in the States and was actually nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize and other stuff. Anyway, there’s letters in here, him writing letters like it’s sort of [an] acceptance speech for the nomination and his opinion about people’s demonstrations and stuff that I thought might be interesting to the students. So that’s [what] I [have] been reading...that one and then of course the other articles you gave me on, was it National Geographic? (Group interview, October 13, 2005)

Louisa’s conversation with the participants echoed our discussion in an individual interview three months earlier, signifying how she had integrated those ideas into her curriculum planning.

Louisa was also keen to contextualize a book study with her students by using the techniques that she had read about and discussed with me from the Fujimura- Fanselow (1996) article:
If I use some of these techniques about you know what are you going to ask, say about this book, what are some questions that you might have about it, which areas do you, and keep my mouth shut and hopefully they won’t feel, I want them to learn something about it. I want them to be able to see what was happening and [unclear] to see it from the other side. (Individual interview, July 10, 2005)

Throughout the study the readings seemed to motivate Louisa to learn more about how to engage her students as well as her fellow colleagues in new ideas.

A Hard Crossword Puzzle

At the time of this study, Amanda was in her 16th year of teaching. She had taught both elementary and secondary level students. She was currently working in an elementary school as a resource educator in a Learning Assistance Centre (LAC). She team teaches and supports regular classroom curriculum by pulling students out of their classes and working in small groups teaching reading for ESL students and struggling readers. She had a caseload of 95 students. She was participating in a leadership preparation program and was also chair of the professional development committee in her school, which involved “working on promoting professional learning communities” (Individual interview, April 28, 2005). She talked about her professional identity: “I feel good about where I am in my career, I feel like I have respect and love with my colleagues and that takes so many years to get there and I feel like...I’m important but in a comfortable way (Individual interview, April 28, 2005).

Amanda spoke about her motivation for being involved in the teacher reading group, indicating the value of supported reading for her professional growth and learning:

Yeah, [laughs] I think reading and learning things is its own reward. Do you know what I mean? I don’t really want to go to professional journals and hunt through for something
I’m interested in. In a way you kind of provide us with things to read which are relevant to our interests. (Individual interview, April 28, 2005)

Amanda attended 3 of 8 group sessions and we conducted three individual interviews. She was keen to read outside of the areas of the group-selected articles. In our first individual interview I asked her, as I did all participants, if there were any additional areas of interest. She identified a number of areas: academic outcomes with ESL students, sexual identity issues with ESL adolescents, boy/girl success in schools, and how the brain works in learning. Amanda saw reading “as its own reward” (Individual Interview, April 28, 2005). Amanda stated the value of having access to information, specifically research, and its professional usefulness:

I find that...information… if you have a strong opinion…for example, the ESL PSA [Professional School Association], we do things like we write letters to the ministry...so having information, solid research that you can kind of use and think about while you’re writing; it’s much better than “it’s just my humble opinion”. (Individual Interview, April 28, 2005)

Amanda wanted to know how teachers could get relevant information necessary to do a good job. She felt strongly that her role as a specialist teacher depended on her ability to connect to the “outside world” in order to serve the needs of her students: “It’s a part of the job that takes up so much time” (Individual interview, April 28, 2005). Time to talk to experts or find the information she needed to be more effective in her job were a priority for Amanda. Amanda attributed the disconnect between her work in the school and the “outside world” as a puzzle that creates barriers to fitting other pieces together:

It’s almost like where do you get a handle on it? It’s like a crossword puzzle, like in a hard crossword puzzle. All you need is one word. You know what I mean? And then you can go from there. (Individual Interview, April 28, 2005)

6 See Appendix A for a list of Amanda’s additional readings..
Finding that piece to the puzzle was clearly a point of frustration for Amanda. The contradiction between the information she needed to serve her students better and the difficulty she identified in not being able to find this information seemed to make her feel disempowered:

You know having someone you can talk to and ask without them looking at you and [saying], “Are you kidding me, you don’t know that?” But if you can’t get a handle on anything [information] then it’s left blank, and it’s frustrating and [you feel] stupid.

(Individual interview, April 28, 2005)

Amanda understood the importance of accessing information outside of her work environment to support the complexity of job as a specialist teacher:

That’s the thing, there’s so much that goes on that we don’t know about, so many opportunities and things out there that we can’t tap into simply because we don’t know they exist. (Individual interview, April 28, 2005)

Yet, the knowledge she needed to fulfill her role as a specialist teacher was often out of reach and difficult to access. This lack of access to information created tension for Amanda: “I feel like I still don’t know everything… As a resource educator you have to know, you can’t say, well, I don’t know. (Individual interview, April 28, 2005). She felt more information and access to knowledge would allow her to work more effectively as a professional.

Supporting teacher’s access to relevant knowledge is an important piece of the puzzle in professional development for specialist teachers. A discussion paper from the British Columbia Teacher’s Federation (2004) outlines the multiple roles that specialist teachers have and the need to provide professional resources for these areas of special education and English as a Second Language. Amanda gives an example from her job to illustrate how access to information might help work more effectively as a specialist teacher:

7 Part of this project has been to provide web-based resources for specialist teachers in these areas. See http://www.bctf.ca/education/InclusiveEd/challenge/.
[Technology], it's key. [sic] We've got a student with selective mutism. She's never spoken a word at school. She's been coming for 4 years, nobody's heard her voice. She does that at school, not at home. [Through] using technology, I mean it's great to find out what is it? Is it trauma? Is it shyness? How do you deal with this? (Individual interview, April 28, 2005).

Amanda’s questions support the need to address how access to information might empower teachers in their professional learning communities. It is not just about increased access, but also about the role teacher specialists are taking on within each learning community. As Amanda said, “Having someone you can talk to and ask”, and how this information can enhance the intersections between professional learning, sharing, and service provided to the students is motivation for providing such access to teachers.

Amanda’s thirst and curiosity for information related to her work was inspiring. The multiple roles and challenges specialist teachers face in addressing inclusivity in their classrooms speaks to the value of supported access as seen in this study. The increased access to research and other sources of information that is now available for some through the Internet might be one resource that Amanda might eventually turn to, although it will require an understanding of the technology itself that deliberately did not figure in this research. At issue here was the potential points of interest and sense of value around such work, as part of professional learning for a teacher such as Amanda. Amanda demonstrated an interest in this work by utilizing a form of supported reading in her areas of professional learning and growth.

A goal of this kind of supported access to information is to help teachers like Amanda find pieces to the puzzles they encounter on a regular basis within the complex learning and teaching environments of their schools. Filling the gap of information between two cultures as in
Pivoine Jaune’s role of multicultural worker, or using information to open dialogue around difficult issues such as cyberbullying as seen with Sally, or Louisa’s example of finding new resources to inspire teacher and student learning, are all part of the argument for increasing public and professional access to information for teachers.
Chapter 6

Situated Learning and Teachers' Professional Knowledge Landscapes

In this chapter I analyze how the members of the teacher reading group formed a professional learning community and participated in a form of situated learning that was defined by membership and social participation. I analyze how the structure and nature of this supported reading group contributed to a social theory of learning that evolved within a relational understanding of knowledge and experience. By participating in the study, participants understood their work, identity, and practices in new ways. This study is framed within the concept of communities of practices, which recognizes learning as a dimension of social practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Professional Knowledge Landscapes and Teacher Learning

Older models of teacher learning have been replaced with terms like the “new professionalism” (D. Hargreaves, 1994) and “transformative teacher professionalism” (Sachs, 2003), which recognizes the changing landscape of the teaching profession. These new conceptions of teacher learning value the fluidity of postmodern culture and the importance of addressing the impact of new technologies and cultural practices embodied within our school communities. The teachers in this study created a form of professionalism that represented this shift away from teacher professionalism that is exclusive, reactive, and slow to change to a conception of teacher learning that advances transformative possibilities (Sachs, 2003, p. 11).

Teachers require meaningful engagement with their colleagues and systemic support to nurture their professional learning. As stated previously, Dall’Alba & Sandberg (2006) reviewed stage models of professional development across various workplaces supporting the idea that teachers need more than a transferring or transmission of knowledge, but require the opportunity
to develop an understanding of what it means to be a teacher (p. 401). Part of this understanding is recognizing the need for an embodied understanding of practice that comes from one’s interpretation of their experience (p. 392). Clandinin and Connelly’s (1991) extensive research on the narratives that teachers ‘live by’ showed how teacher narratives of “storying and restorying” are a “fundamental method of personal (and social) growth” (p. 259). Their research values the importance of teachers’ practical knowledge and the capacity for professional growth through reflection on that practice.

Although Clandinin and Connelly (1991) use teacher narratives to understand teacher knowledge through classroom practice, they also recognized that learning within teachers’ professional knowledge landscape are influenced “by a wide variety of people, places, and things” (1995, p. 5). I will show evidence of how teachers I worked with reflected on their practice, rethought their professional identities, and engaged in meaningful dialogue. I suggest that this form of directed reading within teachers’ professional knowledge landscape generated a learning process that offered new possibilities for the teachers’ intellectual practice and professionalism.

Intertextualities

I use the term intertextualities to signify how the teachers created multiple meanings from the texts. As I have discussed through reader response theory, meaning is mediated in many ways: by the author’s construction of the text, the readers’ knowledge of the texts in relationship to other texts, and the reader’s response to conversations about the text. This form of heteroglossia (Bakhtin) or dialogic approach to understanding texts frames the analysis of this study’s use of situated learning through discourse.

The text by Julia Kristeva (2001) that the teachers read early on in the study, provides an example of how the teachers found multiple meanings in the readings. In this text, Kristeva
argues that three women writers are extraordinary because they address the crisis of humanity through the “weightiness of politics and the limits of human nature” and still maintain their independence (p. xvi). Kristeva likens her remembrance and recounting of these three women’s works to the arenas of life, madness, and words. She sets out to problematize what it is in the feminine that creates such innovative thinking and if this could be considered a form of female genius. Louisa related the article to her experience:

Yeah, it reminded me of people I know, personal friends, who have done maybe things with their lives, may not be things that the world would recognize, but they have made decisions or done things that seemed to show that they were very clever and have it together. (Individual interview, May 10, 2005)

Louisa’s interpretation of the article connects to her own understanding of female genius:

It reminded me of women I know. Cause it relates, I was trying to relate it to me or to women I know and how they deal with situations in their lives. People that may not necessarily be recognized as a genius by other people but because of the things that they do in their lives and the way they perceive the world differently perhaps than men or other women, that’s what I was thinking about when I was reading it. (Individual interview, May 10, 2005)

Louisa’s comprehension of the text also reflected an understanding of Kristeva’s feminist framework:

I think that definition came about from a scientific aspect and probably a male dominated kind of environment and nobody ever really thought about it except in that one way. (Individual interview, May 10, 2005).

Louisa grasps Kristeva’s use of multiple meanings of genius and the importance of different perspectives.
Louisa demonstrates another form of intertextuality in how she relates her experience to the writing of bell hooks. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) used a personal narrative and definition of "engaged pedagogy" to provide a reframing of what it means to teach in a multicultural classroom. hooks (1994) explores the need for classroom structures to recognize differences such as class, race, and sexuality. Louisa evaluates hooks' writing: "I liked this one maybe because I could relate to her as an educator" (Individual interview, May 10, 2005). Louisa frames her connection with the text in relationship to her teacher colleagues:

[It made me think about] the people that I know that are teachers and how they would connect to that. You know when you read you always try to make connections with other people and how they teach and how they would compare what she thought. (Individual interview, May 10, 2005).

Louisa's further reflections on the reading indicates how the she experienced herself through the text:

Just it's good to read things that I can sort of look at and draw experience for myself... it helps me in my sort of learning and how I perceive myself. (Individual interview, May 10, 2005)

Louisa's engagement with the text was connected to perceived similarities with hooks' experience of teaching. She stated the affirmation she felt in reading about similar practices in her classroom, showing how the text validated Louisa's experience:

Louisa: The whole idea of engaging your students and using, well, I kind of related to this because she talks about drama and dramatic language and I think I do a lot of that, especially as an ESL educator. But, it was nice to have her actually say that itself. It's what I do, so it must be okay... That was sort of the highlight for me.

Sarah: So, connections to your own practice, any other connections?
Louisa: The embracing culture...the acceptance of culture as important. I think it’s really important as an ESL teacher that you are doing that.

In this same interview Louisa becomes introspective and chooses to talk about some of her struggles in teaching:

Kids that are failing...I think it’s my fault. But I do stop myself. I mean I do stop and I think, you know what, it isn’t my fault. I’ve done everything I can. This kid is not engaging with me, he’s not doing his work, I’m not getting any support from anyone, so guess what? I’ve done my bit. But you know if you don’t do that you’ll go crazy in the classroom. You just absolutely will go crazy. (Individual interview, May 10, 2005)

Louisa’s interpretation of bell hooks’ writing prompted reflection on her practice. Louisa recounted the difficulty she has had in determining her own professional limits in taking responsibility for her students. She talked about how time and her experience as a teacher has provided her with the insight to get to a place where she has a plan and a way to work out what she called “the hard questions” or a kind of “thinking at another level” (Individual interview, May 10, 2005):

Yeah, so as a teacher you have to... I didn’t realize when I became a teacher that I was going to have to become so-sort of introspective and sort of-think things through. Well, I don’t know, I just thought it was just sort of going to happen, but after you’ve been in it a long time you really do have to come up with some-sort of plan for yourself, how far you’ll go with kids... and you think it through...what do you think you’re going to be able to accomplish as a teacher, those kinds of questions, the hard questions. (Individual interview, May 10, 2005)
Louisa’s interpretation of the texts supported her thinking about her professional identity, her pedagogical practices, and a larger understanding of herself going beyond the professional concerns.

Other participants also engage intertextual elements of interpretation during the group interviews. At the April 29th group interview, the participants talked about the article “Addressing Gender in the ESL/EFL Classroom” (Norton & Pavenlenko, 2004). In the introduction to their literature review of feminist pedagogy in ESL classrooms, the authors state: “We draw examples predominantly from Japan, where grassroots EFL feminist pedagogy first took shape in the 1970’s” (p. 505). The discussion amongst the teachers focused on about how these studies might be useful to their classrooms. In response, Pivoine Jaune sought to connect her knowledge and how the article presented information:

Pivoine Jaune: In China it’s the same, a lot of student[s], you might find them very silent cause they don’t’ get trained to ask questions, they have to accept what the teacher says in class. That’s the way it’s done usually. But I don’t know recently about any change, but the kids are very silent.

Louisa: I think it comes from that respect for authority that it’s engrained in them from young to respect the higher leader.

Pivoine Jaune: And also because in China’s culture we have Confucius. He is still somebody. He is more than a queen, a king. In Chinese culture you know he’s the [sic] I don’t know any king or emperor in China that still keeps that status. From him until his descendants, they still have a very high position even now in China. They still own a lot of land, more than anybody else, and they have a very special status. So teacher means Confucius. For most of them [students][sic] when the parents, usually when they cannot
deal with their children usually they expect the teacher to fix the kid because they have the authority, the power. (Group interview, April 29, 2005)

Pivoine Jaune helped the group better understand the challenges of working with ESL students in a Canadian context. Pivoine Jaune demonstrated her previous knowledge of Chinese culture in relationship to the participants’ questions and cultural assumptions.

At this same group meeting, Pivoine Jaune talked about how she felt squeezed by the conflicting demands of the parents and the school:

Pivoine Jaune: Can you see the expectation from the parents and school? A lot like my role. You get squeezed in between. It is not easy.

Dora: The parents at that state are often just so desperate. They just want help.

Pivoine Jaune: Yeah, but if I send them out to parenting, they will go. And I think because it was a long time ago and not now that they [don’t] know how to deal with their children. They have no relationship [with their child]. It just got lost. (Group interview, April 29, 2005)

Pivoine Jaune responded to questions from other participants about China by offering a historical context. Through dialogue with the teachers, she augmented the discussion about the difficulty ESL parents have in talking to their children about issues of identity:

Louisa: Yeah, when did that whole breakdown happen with the family in China?

Pivoine Jaune: Well it is because there is only one child and the policy…

Louisa: So in the last twenty years?

Pivoine Jaune: Yeah, and then usually six adults take care of one kid or just leave him alone and he will do whatever he likes. And sometimes I saw on the movie the same. The parents [are] work[ing], are so busy. They stay in China and the grandparents take care of
him. They never really have time together. So it is hard for them when they come here.
(Group interview, April 29, 2005).

Pivoine wanted to read about China to more fully understand and serve the Chinese immigrant community in the ten schools where she worked. She wished to learn more about family dynamics because of her role to help families and school personnel communicate. She requested articles from me about family life in China, particularly on the role of women. An article that we discussed during our individual interviews resonated very much with Pivoine Jaune. It took up discussion with our single interviews and it became a point of sharing during our October 14, 2005 group interview when I asked Pivoine Jaune if she had been reading anything interesting. She chose to share with the group a scholarly text that I had given to her a few months earlier called, “Fresh Winds in Beijing: Chinese Feminists Speak Out on the One-Child Policy and Women’s Lives” (Greenlagh, 2001). The article critiqued China’s one-child policy by interviewing women in China. Greenlagh presented what she called an “exciting moment in the history of Chinese feminism” (p. 848). Pivoine Jaune critiqued this new freedom for Chinese women by exposing the author’s contradictory location as a scholar from the United States. Greenlagh argued against the practices of a Communist country yet concluded the article by stating that solution is in working with the government, not against it (p. 880):

At the end [of the article] she put it...the other Chinese way, because you see they allow you a certain liberty to be pregnant as long as you [do] not criticize too much the leader of the country. (Group interview, October 14, 2005)

Pivoine Jaune argued against the idealism presented by the author by stating that it would be difficult to realize such a few of feminism within present Communist China:

That’s like the old times right, you cannot criticize. If you criticize it’s a lot of trouble.

But now at least they are not killing. [There is a] different expression in Chinese. If you
are doing something wrong against the ruler, not only you, —the nine degrees of connection between your parents...and you, your friends, your relatives, and even your family whatever, they would all be in trouble. (Group interview, October 14, 2005)

Throughout this meeting, both Louisa and Sally interjected various questions for Pivoine Jaune. It is Sally who begins another topic:

Sally: May I ask you a question? In your experience or what is your opinion about—sometimes I’ve come across Chinese families who have one child and then they immigrated here and their child is—has a learning disability or physical disability—and I’ve never been able to ask them personal questions even with the multicultural worker there because I don’t think that that’s my place to ask that but I can just—my sense is that there’s a lot of loss or that like some parents feel embarrassed and they come to Canada hoping that their child will be treated more fairly. (Group interview, October 14, 2005)

Pivoine Jaune responded by saying that it is “because these children have no place” in China. (Group interview, October 14, 2005). Pivoine Jaune evaluated the Greenlagh article within a paradigm of eastern and western worldviews:

At the beginning she [Greenlagh] has a lot of pressure to try to compare the Chinese woman with the western, but at the end, somehow she gets to a point that in China you cannot push, you have to be really patient...politics change very slow[ly], so you have to go with the government, work with the government and not against the government, yeah, but if you expect China to be like western world it’s not possible. It’s not going to happen, but you cannot ignore the whole tradition behind it, take[s] forever to change something even in Europe, [if] you want to change something it’s not easy. (Group interview, October 14, 2005).
Pivoine Jaune’s experience as a multicultural worker and her knowledge from other readings about China contributed to a vibrant dialogue amongst the teachers.

Sally’s earlier question about learning disabled children of immigrant families sparked the groups’ interest. At our next group interview we discuss two related articles ("First-Generation Chinese American Families’ Attitudes Regarding Disabilities and Educational Interventions" and "Needs of Chinese Parents of Children with Developmental Disability" (Parette, Chuang, & Huer, 2004; Wong et al., 2004).

Pivoine Jaune continues to add complexity to the conversation: “In the article they talk about [a] different generation of Chinese or East Indian, now America[n].” Pivoine Jaune pointed out how participants of the study had been educated in America, an advantage in communicating with school personnel about their children. She identified the difficulty in working with a generation of Chinese families in which “we don’t even have the same vocabulary” to talk about, for example, “the full range of different types of autism” (December 11, Individual interview). Pivoine Jaune described the article as too general and mostly about parental attitudes, missing the need to provide “more information, make them aware that we have all kinds of service[s]” available to immigrant families. She stressed that parents and school personnel must continue to communicate across differences as a way to “fill in the gap” of information because this changes how learning disabled children of immigrant families can access support through schools.

Pivoine Jaune spoke modestly about her learning: “I think maybe it’s safe to say that I’m still absorbing things” (Individual interview, July 5, 2005). Yet her desire to learn and understand the complexity of her students’ Chinese culture is a thread that traveled through her interviews both individually with me and in dialogue with the participants throughout the project. She extended understanding of the readings by building new knowledge with old. She provided
insights that engaged and addressed the questions about working in a culturally diverse and multilingual educational system.

Reading as Dialogue

In Literature as Exploration (1983) Louise Rosenblatt stated that one purpose of the reading experience was for “critically relating it to other views of human nature and conduct” (p. 13). Although Rosenblatt is referring to the challenge of reading literature, she argued that the genre is insignificant to how the experience of reading can alter perceptions. Texts help us understand the infinite possibilities of existence and experience. When reading is accompanied by a form of dialogue, as in the case of the teacher reading group, another kind of understanding emerges. For the teachers in this study, the social process of reading in community fostered inquiry. Dora’s participation in the study is a good example of how texts in dialogue created new opportunities for reflection and learning.

In our first individual interview, Dora had attended three group sessions and was keen to discuss how she viewed the process thus far. Her professional goals have included returning to graduate school. She discussed her current graduate program as “narrowly focused” and had appreciated this study’s experience of reading in areas that “pulled” her out of familiar areas. She called the dialogue with the teacher reading group “refreshing” (Individual interview, May 9, 2005):

It’s still making me think about what I do from a whole different perspective and with a different group of people…. the coming together of people who are unlike me but we have this commonality...we are all educators in some capacity. (Individual interview, May 9, 2005)
Although not all the participants were regular classroom teachers, Dora recognized how teachers, librarians, counselors, and multicultural workers contribute to her professional learning and reflection:

It’s not often that you necessarily sit down and talk to people who all come at the same group of kids or same thing but from a different place and just kind of talk about that and to hear what’s most important to them and frame your own sort sense into that picture...yeah that’s kind of what I am appreciating the professional opportunity and discussion, um around issues that are all related...but different from what I’m so focused on. (Individual interview, May 9, 2005)

Dora found two articles (Norton & Pavlenko, 2004 & Nelson, 1999) from our group sessions particularly interesting and discussed how they stimulated her interest and curiosity about similar topics. She used the articles to look for additional resources:

When you gave me those two articles on ESL one of the first things I did was I went online and searched e-journals and I started looking at similar topics and other ESL sexuality and I did a whole bunch of other searches and generated some articles. That’s how I did it. I don’t know what others did. It [is] sometimes in a more indirect relationship that this information...that we’re discussing is all generated in some way through different technologies. (Individual interview, May 9, 2005)

Dora explained how she found information:

I just thought I’m going see what else is out here. So I started reading an article about Japan. It started to become interesting...I didn’t do a lot of extensive reading, but just kind of looking at what was coming up on the search...my own kind of interest in that area. I got interested in the whole Japanese area because of our international students here and some of the issues that have arisen. (Individual interview, May 9, 2005).
In the reading group session on April 29, 2005, we began by discussing one of these articles on ESL and queer theory ("Sexual Identities in ESL: Queer Theory and Classroom Inquiry" (Nelson, 1999). In this scholarly text, the author proposes a way to reframe gay-friendly teaching practices within ESL classrooms. The author introduces elements of queer theory to designate the difference between inclusive (gay-friendly pedagogy) and inquiry (queer theory pedagogy) as a useful distinction for looking at sexual identities through a poststructuralist framework. Nelson’s findings are part of a larger research project that proposed how to look at “how the topic of lesbian or gay identities come up in ESL classes, what choices or challenges arise, and what strategies are helpful in dealing with them” (p. 373). Part of this author’s study was generating data from three ESL classrooms, all at a postsecondary level (one community college, two universities).

As we began talking about the article, Dora described what happened at her school when the ESL students participated in a program called “Leave Out Violence.” The program included a classroom presentation focused on homophobia. Dora reflected on the impact of the presentation and the difficulties she thought her ESL students experienced as a result of the presentation:

Yesterday was really interesting because we had L.O.V. [Leave Out Violence]. They do this great presentation and they talk about the ‘isms,’ and one of them, [sic] one about homophobia, and it was interesting because in the ESL [class] [sic], like usually I’ve done it with all the grade 10’s, the girls I think could care less for the most part, the boys have no problem with hot lesbians [laughs], but you know 2 guys together there’s an issue, and that was pretty much, and I think that’s pretty generally how it happens with the occasional, “In my religion that’s not okay,” and that’s pretty blanket for whatever,
however hot you might be or whatever, but in the ESL [classroom] it was interesting because it was mostly not okay. (Group interview, April 29, 2005)

Dora noticed that the students understood discrimination related to sexuality and gender differently after hearing a true story about a gay young man:

You did see a real shift and it seemed somewhat genuine—I'm not saying it changes forever but in that moment they were like—yeah all those things that we were saying aren't fair to attribute to everybody. (Group interview, April 29, 2005)

During this same group interview Dora continued to engage the teachers by posing questions related to her work and their experiences. Dora talked about her perceptions of sexuality across cultural differences and wondered how the other teachers in this study addressed the issue. Dora recalled a conversation with one of the other group members and used it as an opportunity to exchange ideas with the group members:

Dora: You know I was just thinking, it triggered what [Amanda] was saying about you know when the kid says that that's just not okay in my religion.

Amanda: You come to a dead end.

Dora: What do you do with that?

(A Group interview, April 29, 2005)

Amanda responded by recalling moments in her classroom and the challenge of creating open dialogue:

I don't know, like some of the suggestions, I don't know if high school or elementary school is ready for that, the kids, you know instead of saying okay you have role playing and instead of a boyfriend and girlfriend out for dinner, how about 2 men out for dinner that are lovers for example and I mean it would be tough to get the maturity necessary for that to be taken the way it should be taken, you know what I mean, and I remember when
I was at [school], like we had a lot of conversations, they kept calling each other gay as a negative thing and I would say, “There’s nothing wrong with it” blah-blah-blah, but it was really, you know a really tough sell because they were like, “But in my religion it is, there is something wrong with it.” It’s like okay, so where do I go from there? (Group interview, April 29, 2005)

Amanda commented that she found these issues difficult to address in her classroom:

Yeah it was difficult to bring it in like the way that one of these authors suggested, like just you know just casually just like you would you know, reading a story about a man and a wife or you know something like that. (Group interview, April 29, 2005)

The second article we discussed at this group interview, “Addressing Gender in the ESL/EFL Classroom” by Norton and Pavlenko (2004), seemed to flow easily from the other text by Nelson (1999) and prompted more discussion related to the teachers’ experiences in the classroom. In response to the article, Amanda commented:

This is about addressing gender in the ESL classroom which was very interesting because I mean, I think it is so, everyone is so ethnocentric, but coming from, you know, a place where they [ESL students] grow up, they understand the system. You know, they come to Canada and we think our system is you know, the best and trying for those two [education systems] to meet is very difficult. (Individual interview, June 9, 2005)

Amanda recalled an experience with a particular group of male students in her classroom:

So we would have a long discussion about it and it just came down to what they felt they were used to, and yeah it was really a shame cause they were only 17, I mean they’ve got to get used to something else. (Individual interview, June 9, 2005)
Amanda commented on her positive experience in having these tough discussions with students and expressed an understanding of feminism by qualifying the differences between her male and female students:

You know, but that was, it was very interesting talking to students about that type of thing, but really it’s been more interesting about how the women, these young girls who become aware and look at the system and the choices, and just to tell them the choices are there. (Individual interview, June 9, 2005)

Sally interjected with her interpretation of the same article:

When I was reading this article, “Addressing Gender in the ESL Classroom” it was about adult learners and I was just thinking if the teachers, or if teaching in a foreign country as an EFL program, how that would differ than teaching the ESL, TESOL to adult type programs here, or you know [in the] United States or Canada, and just how would that differ. (Group interview, April 29, 2005)

Sally extended the context of the research of both articles by blending issues of gender and sexuality into an area she was familiar with. She recalled her experience in working with immigrant families in Canada:

The thought that I was just having like in terms of government legislation and how the Canadian government allows for when your sponsoring a husband or wife or partner to come who is overseas. It reminds me of some Filipino families that I’ve worked with where the mom has come here or somebody and they are very afraid to access or speak up about who they really are or access anything because they are afraid that their sponsorship of the other person, the other family member is going to be affected. So they live in silence. A lot of it is not just in the Filipino community but also in other Asian families that I have encountered. They just don’t want to speak up because it might affect
the sponsorship of another relative or partner. Even the sponsorship of...if it’s a gay or lesbian partner often the family members, sometimes they will say its his brother or cousin rather than saying its the partner. It’s a gay partnership. That’s the hard thing too.

The good thing is that it is recognized here in Canada you can sponsor - or it doesn’t have to be the person of the opposite sex. (Group interview, April 29, 2005)

Sally identified a Westocentric bias of understanding gender:

Teaching in the ESL classroom in a foreign county and then the issue of gender, I mean you’re teaching adult learners so I think being sensitive to that country’s acceptance. Sometimes we might think that the western culture is more open and accepting but sometimes other cultures can be even more open and accepting and it’s the teacher that has issues with the gender rather than, I don’t know it’s just assumed that we would be more open but it’s not always because some countries or cultures sexuality is not really made a big deal. (Group interview, April 29, 2005)

The literature review used in the Norton and Pavelenko (2004) article relied heavily on evidence from community college level students. Sally commented on the assumptions we have about adult learners and the difficulty in talking about gender across age difference:

Oh yeah, one thing I was just thinking about teaching adult learners, it’s often just assumed that you wouldn’t—the topic of gender—you wouldn’t necessarily be teaching it, it’s sort of expected that there’s that acceptance, you’re an adult so you should accept everybody regardless. But you’re an adult now, it’s just assumed that you should have that, whereas I could see it having to be a ESL educator if somebody in their group or class was being harassed or mocked or something like that, that the teacher could intervene in but it’s almost this, I’m sure that’s why there’s all this research in this area.
because it's assumed that adult learners would be accepting and open, it's just a big assumption. (Group interview, April 29, 2005)

Sally continued to distinguish between the way the Norton and Pavelenko (2004) article addressed adult learners and the assumptions of adult expectations and behavior. Sally demonstrated a sensitivity that added insight to the discussion with the teachers:

Which is why I could see for an adult or any educator in a teaching program, especially for adults for educators who teach adults to be aware that it could be the person's first time that they're sharing information with a group and how to address that and support the person because in a high school they're not sure but as you get into the adult university college age they might want to share that... if they're sure. (Group interview, April 29, 2005)

Sally referenced her own experience as a young adult as a way to challenge assumptions in the article:

I just have this notion in my head that being in the ESL classroom as an adult is safer than being in the high school setting. I still got that in my head that for coming out as an 18, 19, 20...in that adult educational setting...I don't know why...I'm just thinking back like when I was going into university or college, it just seemed like phew...you left all the high school peer pressure and all that and here, you are now and everyone thinks you really are an adult. I don't know, it is just something about those early years, but it's assuming these adult learners are in that age group, but they could be any age. (Group interview, April 29, 2005)

Sally commented on the relevance of this issue with the secondary level teachers of the reading group:
Oh yeah, this is what I thought about. Like in high schools some kids might not want to, or they are still questioning who they are who they’re going to be so they might not disclose or you know make things public because they might not be sure about where they’re at but in an adult ESL class that’s where a person can sort of put it out there right. Maybe that was in the article, but I didn’t read that. (Group interview, April 29, 2005)

By using her own experience, Sally continued to extend the discussion about the complexity of modern gender identities:

I just remembered something and I won’t name which school and I was subbing at a high school and I walk into the room and it was a resource room like had fifteen kids in there. And right away, there was a boy dressed as a girl, a transgendered [individual]. I didn’t pay much attention until after I did the attendance and then I stared at him and I thought [Sally] why are you staring at this person? Like, why would I - I was thinking is that a boy, is that a girl? And I thought why does that matter? Just keep going...you know? I was guilty. I really had to stop and think...and I was thinking why is this affecting me? So this is now making me think about as in the teacher role. The kids were doing whatever they were doing because they had accepted, but I was like: “Okay so which name am I calling?” I was [thinking]: “Be careful not to... do I say him [or] her?” You know? (Group interview, April 29, 2005)

Sally drew on her past experiences with openness and curiosity. Her comments created a dynamic exchange of ideas that resonated across the participants’ interpretation of the readings. The group members extended the text into a social learning process that was comfortable in not having all the answers.

The discussion amongst the participants in response to the texts on gender and sexuality demonstrated the teachers’ ability to extend comprehension of texts through a dialogic social
space of inquiry. New insights were generated amongst participants about the complexity of sexuality and social inclusion across differences of understanding, experience, and cultures.

Amanda’s final evaluation of the article, ‘Addressing Gender in the ESL/EFL Classroom” suggested engagement, although critical of how the article “stated a little bit of the obvious, you know like it presented as though it were a breakthrough” (Individual interview, June 9, 2005). Amanda’s comprehension of the text triggered a reflection that generated new ideas in the present:

I’m just looking back and seeing, you know my own experiences and that’s what I guess I really enjoy, reading articles that give me new ideas but also to reflect back on things I’ve done, and I may be idealizing it and painting it with a very nice brush but generally people do that with past experiences anyway. (Individual interview June 9, 2005)

Dora’s use of inquiry created space for subjective expressions of understanding by the teachers. Pivoine Jaune embodied the bridge between two cultures through her efforts to help immigrant students and their families negotiate schooling. She also acted as another bridge in this study. Her insights facilitated new understanding about Chinese culture and ESL students.

Sally commented on how making mistakes was a productive act that inspired her to learn more:

I think that sometimes like you have to make a mistake or be headed toward a mistake…to inspire you to find an answer… cause we’re all on this like life-learning journey. (Individual interview, June 30, 2005)

For Sally, learning seemed to come from the knowledge she gained from the readings, but it was also about building relationships and sharing knowledge with others. Creating knowledge through dialogue within a community of practice is key to meaningful situated learning.
However, the teachers also needed to have an individual commitment to their learning that enhanced the overall experience of the study. Louisa talked about her survival as a teacher as “motivating yourself, reading on your own, and developing a self-directed understanding of why you are teaching.” The teachers’ experience of the reading group was more than a transmission of knowledge. This study provided an opportunity for the teachers to develop a deeper understanding of what it means to be a teacher. The teachers created a seamlessly woven interpretation of experiences that went beyond the texts themselves to construct new knowledge. The “generality of any form of knowledge lies in the power to renegotiate the meaning of the past and future in constructing the meaning of present circumstances” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 34).

The teacher’s engagement and participation also reflected a larger understanding of themselves and their lives, finding meaning and understanding within their professional communities of practice. The teachers’ learning experience within the reading group went beyond a exclusively internal process. Their discussions contributed to a social theory of learning that was “an evolving, continuously renewed set of relations” (p. 50).

The reading group provided a structure for the teachers to identify professional concerns, interpret scholarly texts, share personal stories, and support eachother in negotiating their teacher responsibilities. The structure of the reading group resisted institutional processes of professional development. I suggest that it was the openness to learning from the periphery of conventional models of professional development that created vibrancy and meaning for the teachers. The teachers’ reading and interpreting texts together facilitated a social participation of engagement through questions, reflections, and dialogue that opened up new perceptions and ideas. This particular group of teachers generated a relational space to learn and grow within their.
professional roles and responsibilities, providing new understandings of what it means to be a teacher.
Chapter 7

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter summarizes the findings in relation to the research questions and reports on the limitations, challenges, and need for future research in the area of teacher reading and professional development. The purpose of this study was to investigate how supported access, which was not otherwise readily available to the participants, might create intellectual engagement and a form of professional learning within teachers’ communities of practice. I sought to provide evidence that shows how supported access to scholarly texts with teacher professional learning communities can contribute to a social practice of learning that deepens teacher understanding and pedagogy. This investigation is situated within a larger study committed to improving public and professional access to research and scholarship (Willinsky, 2006). Key to informing this study was existing literature on feminist research as praxis and situated learning. Within this study, qualitative data in the form of individual and group interviews were used for the analysis. I provide a response to the four research questions followed by recommendations for future research. Results from the analysis of these data lead to the following conclusions and suggestions for further research.

Research Question #1

What, if any, effect does participation in a reading group have on female teachers’ learning, interest, and engagement with educational research?

Engagement with the research texts seemed to become more meaningful when there was a clear relationship between the ideas and how those ideas resonated with the lived experiences of the teachers. For some the articles were seen as idealistic, and nothing new that at times left
the participants wondering, “So what?” The teachers extracted information and made judgments on the research texts based on their perceived usefulness to the teachers’ thinking and practice.

The language of the research texts was a challenge for some of the participants, who described them using terms such as “dry” and “wordy.” Pivoine Jaune discussed the difficulty she had in understanding the language of some of the research articles, which speaks to how research could be made more accessible to educators whose first language is not English. Quite often the research presented was conducted outside of Canada. The participants commented on the challenge in relating research outside of Canada to their teaching communities.

For Louisa, participation in the reading group became an opportunity for her to read new topics, extend her research about China, and find more resources for her new curriculum. Louisa was committed to reading and re-reading the texts even though she found some of the articles difficult on the first read. She was curious about new terms like “poststructuralism” from the Nelson (1999) article and saw the texts as a way to deepen understanding of herself. Louisa felt affirmed and validated when she recognized elements of herself in the text by bell hooks, which prompted her to reflect more deeply about her professional identity. Reading the article on feminist teaching in Japan “Women’s Studies and Feminist Pedagogy: Critical Challenges to Japanese Educational Values and Practices” (Fujimura-Fanselow, 1996) prompted Louisa to consider her own teaching practices with her ESL students. She also recommended teaching strategies from the article to colleagues in her department.

Pivoine Jaune discussed her involvement in the study with her supervisor, which indicates that she was engaged with the study. The reading group nurtured Pivoine Jaune’s already existing interest in reading, but she also recognized that empirical findings helped her develop a more “forceful” understanding of the cultural complexities she grappled with as a multicultural worker. Although Pivoine Jaune loved reading fiction, she also recognized that
reading research helped her to learn more about her Chinese immigrant students and families. She requested more research articles about contemporary Chinese families after the study ended.

Dora saw the experience of the reading group as “refreshing” and a way for her to reframe her understanding of the issues being discussed. She could resist old interpretations, rethink her assumptions and preconceptions, and create new ones in relationship with other participants (Kooy, 2006). The participants’ discussion of the Nelson (1999) article on queer theory pedagogy prompted Dora to ask questions about what resources were available for queer students. She said that the articles on ESL and sexuality “made her think” and prompted her to look for related articles and texts through Internet searches.

Amanda’s participation in the study reinforced the value of information and knowledge for teachers who wanted to advocate politically around educational issues. She valued having “solid research” to use in writing letters to government agencies. Amanda evaluated reading the research as “its own reward”. In particular she talked about how the articles gave her new ideas and helped her reflect on past teaching experiences. She recognized both connections and limitations in being able to utilize examples of feminist or queer theory based pedagogical techniques. Amanda described the conversations that came out of the readings relevant and not discussions that would come up “naturally” with her colleagues. Amanda appreciated the process of engaging in conversations about the research articles with her peers. She commented on the “enjoyment factor” of the study. As a leader of professional development in her school Amanda wanted to implement a similar professional learning program with her teacher colleagues. Amanda’s genuine thirst and curiosity for research related to her work was inspiring and speaks to the need to develop supported reading environments for teacher learning and growth.

For Sally, the research texts added valuable focus to the discussions with the teachers in the study. Sally was intrigued with issues of gender and technology and showed keen interest in
wanting to read more on this topic. She discussed some articles with her outside peers and used them to open dialogue on the issue of cyberbullying. She talked about how the reading of scholarly texts was a starting point from which practical ideas could emerge.

Maxine was excited to learn new terms such as defeminizing from the Jensen, et. al., (2004) article. She appreciated the theoretical connection to the teaching profession and the value of enriching her “own understanding with particular topics and reading.” Her engagement with the articles on gender and technology created a path for her to reflect on her role as a leader of technology in her school. She found resonance in the texts by connecting to a discourse of sharing and building relationships through the use of technologies and computers in her school and the larger district.

All six participants were keen for me to find them additional articles, both scholarly and practical, as a type of focused individual learning support for areas related to their individual professional practices and school contexts (Appendix C).

Research Question #2

How does the validation of subjective, contingent experience within the social process of learning contribute to the understanding of research texts?

Learning through participation is seen as “an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 31). The teachers engaged in a unique process of learning by seamlessly weaving their interpretations of the texts with an embodied understanding of their practice. This intertextuality was evident in how the teachers reflected on their practice, rethought their professional identities, and engaged in meaningful dialogue that enhanced their learning. A discourse of social justice was woven between the texts, interpretations, and conversations of the teachers’ desire to more effectively serve their students and communities. They reconceptualized their understanding of pedagogy, both in relationship to one another and
in the contexts of their school communities, through a form of social participation and renewed understanding of teaching. The teachers were not expected to act as the ‘expert’. There was openness to how participants talked to each other that created a dialogic socially situated inquiry on the periphery of institutional processes.

For Louisa, the readings prompted introspection that allowed her to think at another level in considering her professional responsibilities to students.

Pivoine Jaune’s knowledge of the readings and her understanding of Chinese culture expanded understanding amongst the teachers about the barriers immigrant families experienced in negotiating Canadian culture. Her own insight based on her practice prompted inquiry and new ideas for reading on the topic of working with immigrant students with learning disabilities.

For Dora, the different roles the teachers’ played within their school communities enriched her own learning. In response to the article on queer theory-based pedagogy, Dora’s reflection and response to her queer students’ struggles created an exchange of questions with the participants that didn’t require a determinate response.

Sally was comfortable not having answers to all the questions raised during the reading group. She shared her experience of struggling with how to address a transgendered student in her classroom. Her openness facilitated new questions for the teachers.

The nature of the reading group encouraged a form of engagement and participation that went beyond a larger understanding of the teachers’ lives. The teachers found meaning and new constructions of knowledge within their professional communities of practice. This form of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) provided a social dimension of learning for the teachers. They could identify professional concerns, interpret scholarly texts, share personal stories, and support each other in negotiating their professional identities.
Although Lave & Wenger (1991) discuss the goal of legitimate peripheral participation as ideally a generative social practice, the discursive practices of the group seemed at times immersed in an assumed understanding of meaning. This made it hard to deconstruct or unpack how language contributed to the construction and validation of the participants' interpretations. At times I felt that it was more difficult for Pivoine Jaune to find her way into conversations. Learning through engagement with research texts within communities of practice faces the challenge of how to generate understanding outside of one's comfort zone or in what pedagogically we know are the places of discomfort and disturbance where other kinds of learning can happen.

Research Question #3

How does a form of supported access (through information technologies) to feminist research and scholarship in education and beyond contribute to the experiences of this reading group of female educators?

As stated, the social participation in the study was an important indication of the teachers' level of engagement. The texts themselves challenged and interested the participants. They sought ways to seek out other resources and or talk with their peers outside of the study. The readings prompted introspection and new perceptions about their professional identities and capacities to respond to issues of diversity and cultural differences. By discussing the readings, the participants developed reflective capacities with participants to redefine their teaching practices and to articulate new ideas for their practice.

Participants found new words and terms in the research that frustrated them, excited them, and made them curious. For those engaged in learning new terms, the teachers integrated this new understanding into discussions of pedagogy and their perceptions of professional identity.
The supported access that I provided to the teachers exposed them to research and scholarly texts that would not usually be available to them. I suggest that this exposure created a sense of intellectual community for the teachers. They critically challenged empirical findings in relation to their experiences as educators. Exposure to these scholarly texts gave them a larger picture to interpret, critique, and reflect on their understanding of teaching. This climate of reading generated curiosity and critiques of the research in context of public education in Canada.

Engaged participation in the study was shown in three distinct ways:

- New perceptions of teacher identity and practice in relationship with new constructions of knowledge.
- A form of dialogic learning around issues of diversity and cultural differences.
- Reflection and action in reframing pedagogical practices and creating new curricular materials.

My role as the group librarian provided supported access in a number of ways. I took responsibility for locating the articles and distributing them to the participants. I was able to draw freely from the electronic resources from the nearby university library of which I was a member.

My initial hope in beginning the study was that the participants would be keen to be involved in learning how to search for the research texts. Part of my role would be to show them how to use the Internet and to test a reading support tool on-line. This was part of this larger study by John Willinsky in an effort to further understand how such tools can assist teachers in their use and access to scholarly texts. Early on in the process, all of the teachers requested that I locate the information for them, which clarified my role of group librarian. This role was an important component in maintaining the sustainability of the reading group because the time
required to find articles was not conducive to how the teachers saw what was already a significant commitment of their own personal time in being involved in the study. All six participants were keen for me to find them more articles based on their individual interests. My role as group librarian provided participants with more focused support in areas related to their professional practices and school contexts.

Louisa valued this form of supported reading as it related to her pedagogical practice. She brought individual articles and texts with her to the group meetings and referenced them in conversation with the participants. She also spent the most individual time with me talking about how we could gather useful information for a new curriculum she was developing. We spent time using the Internet as a way to gather visuals and media related articles for this same curriculum. Louisa also took advantage of learning more about open access to digital scholarly research through a planned workshop in June 2006. This was also an opportunity for Louisa and I to discuss her new curriculum and talk about additional sources of information that would assist her in the final planning of the unit.

Pivoine Jaune talked about the additional readings that I selected for her during the teacher reading group interviews. The readings acted as a way for her to “get more insight” about Chinese immigrant families, stating the importance of reading these texts as a way for her to more fully understand the families she was working with. Pivoine Jaune requested supported access to articles on family life in China after the study officially ended.

Amanda saw the supported reading as the opportunity to read professional articles relevant to her interests without having the time herself to “hunt through professional journals.”

Sally’s participation in the reading group seemed to connect with her desire to improve her learning and find a collegial space where she could talk about her professional questions.
Sally appreciated the voluntary element of the reading group and appreciated that fact that the readings were not “mandated.”

Research Question #4

How does supported access contribute to the range of topics discussed and the evolving expression of reading interests within the group; to the participants’ thinking about their professional identities and perception of their work; to their thinking about their pedagogical practices; to a larger understanding of themselves and their lives, going beyond these professional concerns?

The participants utilized my role as traveling librarian by requesting a range of topics both individually and collectively throughout the study (Appendix B &C). The teachers thirsted for varying kinds of information and texts. Engagement with these texts also took many different forms; skillful evaluations, direct critiques, and reflective responses. Through engaging with the texts, participants thought about their professional identities and about how they might respond to complex issues within their work environment. This engagement also went beyond these professional concerns. Participants talked about the enjoyment in meeting with other colleagues and having “good solid conversations” and the value in learning more about who they were outside of their professional roles and identities.

Although already reading about China, Louisa asked me to support her reading with information about the political events of 1989 and the Tiananmen Massacre. Louisa’s engagement with the texts on female genius (Kristeva, 2001) and transformative feminist teaching (hooks, 1994) provided the opportunity to for her to reflect on her professional identity. Her involvement in the study prompted her to ask some “hard questions” and what she felt like she could accomplish as a teacher. Louisa talked about how the readings helped her to more deeply understanding how she perceived herself.
Pivoine Jaune talked about the study as a way to connect with the other teachers. She enjoyed talking with the teachers about the readings. Pivoine Jaune struggled with how to work more effectively as a multicultural worker. Pivoine Jaune saw her professional role as “squeezed in between” the parents and the school. The readings helped her to communicate the need to continue to bridge this gap. Her critique of the research articles on disabilities and ESL immigrant parents contributed to an understanding of how educational discourse around learning disabilities is untranslatable for some Chinese immigrant families. Pivoine Jaune commented on the difficulty in communicating information to families who don’t share the same vocabulary. Effects of the one child policy, the political context of Communism, and women’s changing roles were additional topics Pivoine Jaune requested (Greenhalgh, 2001; Howell, 2002; Wetzel, 1996). Pivoine Jaune’s participation contributed to a larger understanding of Chinese culture within the context of the research discussed in the group interviews. Pivoine Jaune’s interest in Chinese culture and women’s experience, prompted rich engagement around three related articles that she shared in the teacher reading group (Greenhalgh, 2001; Howell, 2002; Wetzel, 1996). The article on the one child policy provided the opportunity for Pivoine Jaune to articulate the contradictions in defining freedom for women in China and the impact on the individual and their families if one chooses to challenge the ideology of the state. Pivoine Jaune bridged east and west worldviews of China within the teacher reading group.

For Dora, participation in the reading group was an opportunity to learn from her peers, talk about what was important to them, and reconsider her own perceptions and understanding. The readings prompted Dora to consider how to challenge homophobia in schools.

Amanda commented on the how the reading of research could help her respond to larger educational policy issues as well as think about her professional abilities. Amanda described the study as a directed learning process. The discussions during the group interviews generating new
ideas that prompted new ideas about her pedagogical practices. Amanda reflected on teaching moments in which relationships were built and difficult issues discussed in the classroom. She placed the articles in context of her students’ lives and the complexity of their cultural communities.

The ESL, gender, and sexuality articles (Nelson, 1999; Norton & Pavenlenko, 2004) also became a place where Amanda reflected on the perceptions of difference between two different educational systems. She articulated a renewed understanding of feminism by teaching her female students about their range of choices in relationships. These texts also supported a critical evaluation of the research that reflected Amanda’s openness to question her ability to respond to many of the complexities of the social world of her classroom.

Sally requested additional information on the issue of cyberbullying (Allbon & Williams, 2002; Department of Education and Skills, 2005; McCreary, Ehrich, & Lisanti, 2001; Network, 2005; Org, 2005). These resources included guides, lesson ideas, and website resources. Sally also found useful a study from New Library World about children’s use of the Internet and censorship. A short article from the Media Awareness Network Sally found the most helpful in terms of “tips” and “practical information” that she shared with her colleagues. Related to her professional practice and concerns within her school, Sally commented on the usefulness of sharing practical information about cyberbullying with her colleagues.

During the reading groups’ discussion on the articles on gender and sexuality (Nelson, 1999; Norton & Pavenlenko, 2004), Sally expanded the range of issues by asking questions about differences in teaching ESL/EFL in different countries and issues regarding same sex parents who immigrate to Canada. She also reflected on the perception of teacher practice within a Western worldview in relation to gender equity and pedagogy. She distinguished the pedagogical implications between child and adult learners when talking about issues of gender
bias and the different challenges for elementary and secondary teachers. Sally drew on her past teaching experiences with insight and openness. Her engagement with the articles on girls and the new economy prompted her to reflect on her practice and ask what tools there might be in an expanding age of new technologies. She was curious about research that would help her with girls who have learning disabilities indicating how this kind of supported reading process allowed the topics to expand and find resonance within the particular professional roles of the participants.

Maxine demonstrated her interest in the articles on ESL and gender (Nelson, 1999; Norton & Pavenlenko, 2004) by unpacking the differences between cultures within the ESL student population. She asked others in the group for information and reflected on her professional role as a teacher librarian in providing resources and support for queer students. Maxine’s questions also created a rich discussion about transgendered and transsexual teachers and the role of schools in providing support for both teachers and students. Maxine’s ability to reflect on pedagogical implications related to the Fenwick (2004) article came back to her own professional role and how she talked about her personal discomfort in what she felt was a living out of the corporate agenda in schools. Maxine’s engagement extended into a much bigger picture of corporate ideologies in schools and the need to publicly critique and question such discourses capturing Fenwick’s thesis in context of her own work and role as a professional teacher/librarian.

Maxine’s discussion of the articles by Jensen, et. al. (2004) and Fenwick (2004) provided a thoughtful critique of her professional identity as a leader in technology. She talked about the perception of gendered computer practices and knowledge amongst her teacher peers. Her understanding of the Jensen, et, al., (2004) article pushed Maxine to assert that girls are capable of finding what they are interested in, but also led her into a reflective space about pedagogical
resources available around issues of other differences such as class, ability, and sexuality and how issues of who has access to technology and computers as indicative of the larger problem of the digital divide. Maxine’s interest in gender and technology evolved into a deeper engagement with issues of diversity. She utilized this form of supported reading by requesting additional readings on these topics.

**Benefits**

The non-prescriptive, communicative model of exchange within the teacher reading group provided opportunities for participants to share extensive understanding of their practice within a collegial and supportive environment. Previous research suggests the importance of these elements in effective teacher development (Glazer et al., 2004; Sherin & Shulman, 2004).

Throughout the study the teachers created moments of reflective practice and found collective association within their professional learning community. The teachers’ motivation for learning came from a need to better serve their students. The reading group as a form of situated learning gave the teachers a definite sense of membership within their community of practice. The opportunity to share reflections on their practices enriched the dialogue and interpretation of the texts that went beyond an instrumental model of professional development.

The teachers’ discourse challenged the “authoritative discourse” (Bakhtin, 1986) of professional development. They rejected any unified meaning of culture, sexual identity, or teachers as experts in their reflections and reconstructions of their teacher identities. The dialogue acted as a social process of learning that offered new opportunities for inquiry and reflection. There wasn’t a need to have all the answers and the teachers seemed to feel secure resting within the indeterminate spaces of understanding reflected in their subjective experiences. In this sense, the teacher reading group established itself as an alternative to
conventional institutional processes associated with professional learning by making visible the complex construction of teacher identities and practices.

The teachers’ use of inquiry in relationship to the text focused on building relationships with each other. The teachers seemed to agree that a deeper understanding of critical issues in teaching could strengthen their relationships with colleagues and students.

The teachers’ reading interests were driven by their particular school environments, their previous experiences, and how they negotiated their professional identities (Hargreaves, 2001; Reio, 2005; Day, 2002; Britzman, 1991; Phelan, 2005). The teachers generated new insights about the complexities of sexuality and social inclusion within their schools. They articulated the difficulty of bridging cultures with ESL students and their families. Maxine engaged the teachers in thinking about the need to challenge the influence of corporate discourse on schooling and how to reframe the use of technologies in school. In many ways the teachers embodied insight and practices for ‘surviving’ the profession.

The particularities of each participant’s work environment and previous experiences enriched the level of dialogue and engagement. The interpretation of the texts went beyond an exclusively internal process that generated a relational space to question and expand old ideas with new knowledge. The teachers engaged in a form of legitimate peripheral participation that contributed to a deeper understanding of what it means to be a teacher within the complex social environments of public schools in Canada.

Challenges of Supported Access

As the traveling librarian, I acted as a human interface to the digital world for the teachers. My initial hope that the teachers would engage with technology in using an on-line reading support tool designed by the Public Knowledge Project (Willinsky, 2006) dissipated early on in the study as the teachers discussed lack of time and resources to find relevant information. Louisa
discussed with me the anxiety that she felt in using technology citing previous bad experiences in which training with technology had resulted in feelings of inadequacy.

I found it difficult to filter and select texts on the topics that the teachers identified. The teachers also needed sufficient time to read the many texts that I made available to them. The early group interviews were unfocused, and that led me to believe that some of the participant’s hadn’t read the research under discussion. By our second group interview, the teachers asked if I could accompany a summary of the readings in the package I dropped off at their schools. My summaries of the research went beyond the existing abstract, acting as a kind of advance organizer. The teachers would skim this outline during our group interviews and asked for definitions or explanations of terms used in the articles.

The study represented a form of informal professional learning because the teachers were voluntary participants. Our meetings happened outside of the structures of their workplaces. However, these conditions made it challenging to get a full group together often. This was one of the reasons the group agreed to continue to meet for over a year.

The future of this form of professional participation is uncertain. The amount of supported professional development time has diminished for teachers since the beginning of my career in 1984. Currently teachers' professional development focuses on issues related to accountability, meeting standards based curriculum, and learning procedural tasks for high stakes testing. There is less focus on professional learning activities that support teachers developing and nurturing meaningful intellectual activities within their communities of practice.

This study also indicates the benefits of exposing teachers to relevant research. Investing time to train teachers to become more comfortable in using information technologies to access information could enrich their learning.
Challenges of Feminist Research as Praxis

All six of the participants talked of the difficulty in finding time to read the articles within their busy lives as teachers, mothers, daughters, caregivers, partners, and friends.

In many ways the participants’ engagement and interest in the research texts assumed an understanding of liberal feminism. Their topics of discussion included equity, choices available for girls and boys in public education, an interest in multiculturalism, the strength of women, feminist pedagogy, and issues of access and support for immigrant families.

Through the reading group discussions, the teachers redefined how they viewed their professional responsibilities. They used their experiences to extend understanding and knowledge of the topics of the research articles. The participants shared an interest in issues of gender, as well as discussions that encompassed differences of race, ethnicity, and sexuality.

My interest in working with women is informed by a long history of work by feminists. Women’s intellectual circles and reading groups have generated social change and new ways of using language and constructing knowledge. Within the fragmentation of the feminist landscape is the need to reflect on how feminism might also be revitalized within teacher professionalism.

These female teachers took up issues of justice and equity in topics they choose and in their discussions of the readings. They showed a commitment to reading and understanding differences within their communities of practice. Professional learning opportunities for teachers need to be designed that can sustain meaningful membership within professional learning communities. These communities also need to embody the complexities of differences within social spaces of learning and professional growth.

As a form of praxis, this study sought to explore how a teacher reading group could lead to political expression and action. Teachers in the study were involved in leadership activities.
Amanda’s understanding of how information could be used in political advocacy indicated that this connection is possible. The teachers’ interests engaged a kind of thinking that was about social inclusion. Maxine as a teacher leader in technology asked how students might find themselves in the curriculum. Pivoine Jaune advocated a way for immigrant families with children with disabilities to find the resources needed for their children to be successful in school.

The larger question of how the discussions were grounded in an assumed understanding of equity and justice contributed to a kind of action for the participants. Louisa created a new curriculum about student revolutions. Sally shared information with her colleagues. Whether these reflections and discussions had an effect on the teachers’ abilities to influence students or their colleagues to see themselves as citizens capable of acting within the political structures of Canadian society is difficult to answer.

The teachers were able to create a public space within the reading group in which ideas were contested. The teachers’ embodied experience as women resonated within a reading experience that embraced relationality amongst themselves with the promise of a deeper and more expansive way of thinking and acting in the world.

Implications

Professional Learning in the Age of Information

Professional learning through reading, when used in the context of supported access to on-line research, can be successfully implemented to engage teachers in talking thoughtfully about their practice within the larger social and political needs of public education. Key aspects that led to the success of this experience were:

- A non-prescriptive learning environment in which the teachers determined the process for both meeting and what topics they were interested in discussing.
• A type of supported access to research material on-line that would not usually have been available to them.

• The delivery of reading materials the responsibility of the facilitator contributed to the sustainability of the project over the fifteen months of the project. Time, access, and skill in searching for relevant materials were noted by some of the participants and indicated the pertinence of the open access movement and its potential for much greater access and benefit for professional groups (Willinsky, 2006).

• Composition of the reading group itself prompted a variety of topics and insights of the materials being discussed and in response to stories shared. All of the teachers had at least five years of experience teaching. The teachers’ length of time in the profession, different content areas, specialist areas, experience teaching primary and secondary students, enriched the learning process of the study.

The Value of Supported Reading Environments

Women’s access to knowledge and learning has always been inherently political. Women’s intellectual work has also been a foundation of feminism as a political movement. As seen in the discussion in Chapter 3 of women’s reading groups throughout North American history, women’s social participation in sharing and creating new knowledge is a worthy area of study. Chris Weedon (1987) postulated the “importance of making theory accessible and of the political importance of transforming the material conditions of knowledge production and women’s access to knowledge” as an important element of the feminist project (p. 7). This access to knowledge has been reconfigured by computer technology and access to the Internet. In context of access to scholarly research, John Willinsky (2006) says: “The public’s right of access to this knowledge is not something that people have to earn. It is grounded in a basic right to know” (p. 125). Teachers’ basic right to know and access public research related to their professional
learning is a regulated process with limited access to digital resources and scholarly texts. Although the number of open access scholarly texts are increasingly available on the Internet, time, support, and institutional structures limit how teachers might access and find time to integrate this knowledge into their communities of practice and intellectual landscape. What this study has shown is the value in making those texts available within a supported reading environment.

Pivoine Jaune’s question to me during our final group interview speaks to the continuing need to make educational texts and research more public. Pivoine Jaune could not find enough materials through her own Internet search to support her professional learning. Lack of skill in accessing digital resources also speaks to the need to provide training around accessing information for professional learning communities within public education. Issues of multiculturalism, racism and equity in schools prompted difficult questions for the teachers with indications that the social world of the schools has changed. The teachers identified lack of resources that could address the complex questions about the effects of immigration, transmigration, and the growing population of refugee families within their communities of practice.

Professional Learning as Reflective Spaces

The teachers of this study demonstrated the value of reading research to reflect and recreate new ways of thinking of their professional identity and pedagogical practices. Louisa talked about the importance of an “internal” understanding to guide how teachers create professional development practices. This kind of teacher learning moves beyond older models of teacher professionalism by providing teachers with opportunities to engage in a deeper understanding of their practice in relationship and dialogue with each other. Although the teachers in this study were inward looking, their reflective practices were grounded in a transformative agenda that
asked how they could improve the learning and social outcomes for their students. The teachers of this study enacted a form of “transformative teacher professionalism” (Sachs, 2003) that reflects a kind of teacher professionalism that is responsive to teachers’ need to more fully understanding their practice in context of larger social and economic issues.

Louisa expressed the lack of meaningful learning opportunities she had experienced within her professional learning history, commenting about how she had to learn how to survive as a teacher without much support. Most of her previous experience of professional development programs had been about “selling something”; a “flashcard and pens” positioning teacher learning within a process of increasing commodification of teacher professionalism. Luke (2004b) describes this trend in the teaching profession as a kind of “commodity fetishism” that “predicates the efficacy of education policy, the practice of teaching, and particular versions of student outcomes on production use” (p. 1434). The reading group seemed to provide the opportunity for the teachers to engage in acts of knowledge that crossed time/space divides and social geographies (A. Luke, 2004b).

Professional Learning in Relationship

The teachers’ learning required resources and opportunities to critically examine ideas together with their peers. The different interpretations of the texts created questions and dialogue amongst the participants. The interpretative process of reading created moments of genuine inquiry, rethinking and reframing of the teachers’ professional identities and pedagogical practices in a renewed set of relationship within their professional learning communities. This form of collective association and learning promises a renewed and important shift away from institutionally driven teacher learning models, by “moving the locus of control to the needs of teachers individually and collectively, operating inside and outside of schools” (Sachs, 2003, p. 14). This kind of relationship building across content areas and school roles and responsibilities,
such as Pivoine Jaune's work with ESL students and their parents, expanded the conversations into important areas of learning for the teachers in this study.

Recommendations

This study strove to further understand the relationship between supported on-line access to research and teacher learning through reading scholarly texts as a form of professional development. The teachers' participation in the study moved beyond conventional models of professional development that are self interested, exclusive, and driven by legislative, external requirements. The study was an emergent process of learning in which the direction and focus of texts and range of access to research was expansive, reflecting a much needed model of learning for teachers that values the creation of new knowledge and teacher driven professionalism.

This research showed that meeting outside designated professional time added a relaxed and non-prescriptive element to the study supporting the need for teachers themselves to shape and define the scope and focus of their professional learning opportunities.

Further research is needed in learning how to support teachers reading public research, specifically in how to utilize open access journals with supported on-line reading tools to provide background information or contexts relevant for teacher reflection and practice.

Additional research is also needed in how to continue training and support for teachers who are interested in engaging with technology, particularly in how access to digital research and resources through the Internet and World Wide Web can support their pedagogical practices.

Although this study showed six teachers' desire to more deeply understand the complex social world of schools through the reading of relevant research, this in no way can generalize a deterministic understanding of teaching or teacher professional identity. However, this study has shown the possibility of engagement in providing social situated learning opportunities for teachers within their professional communities of practice.
This study gave me the opportunity to observe how six teachers engaged with scholarly research. That engagement took many forms and speaks to the continuing need to support educators' intellectual journey amidst the growing complexity of our schools social and cultural practices. What these teachers taught me is the importance of nurturing their desire to develop compassionate responses to difference through social participation and engagement with new knowledge.
APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

The following questions guided the group and individual interviews.

• Tell me about some of your professional goals at this time.

• How would you describe your current reading practices?

• What would you like to get out of this project?

• In what ways do you see your teaching environment mediated by technology?

• How do you see technology and/or new media shaping interactions between educators, staff, and students?

• What technologies do you find useful in the school?

• What do you think educators need to use information technology effectively?

• In what ways, if any, do you think gender influences one’s relationship with technology?

• What do you think is the biggest challenge of living in a hyper-mediated world?

• What do you think it means to be informationally literate?

After we have began reading the texts, the following questions were asked:

• What makes this topic important to you?

• What related materials would you find useful in learning more about this topic?

• What ideas did you get from the article?

• Does this reading remind you of anything else?

• What other connections did you make?

• Did you find the reading interesting? If yes, why? If no, why?

• Do you disagree with anything the article presented?
• Would you recommend this reading to anyone else?
• Would you like to read more related to this topic?
• How do you see educational theory in relation to your work?
• How does your experience of teaching influence how you read research?
• Tell me about your experience of the teacher reading group.
APPENDIX B

Group Interview Readings

April 1, 2005


April 29, 2005


July 15, 2005


**October 27, 2005**


**February 6, 2006**


*Domestic News.*


NewsWire, C. P. (2005a, October 21, 2005). Excerpts from B.C. Supreme Court Justice's Brenda Brown's ruling to fine the B.C. Educators' Federation $500,000 for defying October 9 Contempt of Court ruling related to the union's illegal strike.

*Canadian Business and Current Affairs.*


APPENDIX C

Individual Readings by Participant

Additional Readings/ Areas of Interest

Amanda

Topics of interest: Marshal McLuhan, academic outcomes with ESL students, sexual identity issues with ESL adolescents; boy/girl success in schools;

Swain, J. (2005). Sharing the same world: boy’s relations with girls during their last year of primary school. Gender and Education, 17 (1), 75-91

Louisa

Topics of interest: ESL/EFL; Japan and Feminist Pedagogy; bell hooks, and Tiannemen Massacre


Maxine

**Topics of interest:** Diversity/multicultural issues for high school teachers; gender and technology


www.bctf.bc.ca/cgi/LessonAidsDb.exe/frm_subject


www.enc.org/features/lessonplans.


Abstracts for articles:


**Sally**

**Topics of interest:** Cyber-bullying, girl and boy achievement.


**Dora**

**Topics of interest:** Restorative justice in groups


Poivine Jaune

Topics of interest: Women and family life in China


Norton and Pavlenko Article Summary

Gender as

- an individual variable
- a complex system of social relations and discursive practices (written and spoken texts)
- constructed in social contexts
- one of race, ethnicity, class, ability, sexuality

Looks at gender in the classroom through four ways

1. Curricular innovation
2. Feminist teaching practices
3. Topic management
4. Classroom management and decision making practices

**Lived Curriculum**

This section addresses new or revised programs with young Japanese women, Latina immigrants, and Malaysian male college students.

All examples are post secondary

**Alternative Worlds**

Case Studies

1. Advanced ESL writing class in Toronto - Reading the romance/soap operas
Challenging Topics

Cultural and linguistic diversity is now a central critical issue and, as a result the meaning of literacy pedagogy has changed as well” hybrid cross cultural discourses p. 14 NLG

How to deal with controversial question or comment in the ESL classroom?
- as a way to develop linguistic and intercultural competence and multivoiced consciousness with students

Case Studies

1. US Community college - queer theory
2. Morgan - Chinese students and exploration of gender roles in family
3. Teacher training programs - sexual harassment

Sharing Power

Feminist pedagogy as sharing power in the classroom.

Case Studies

Japanese Women’s Studies classroom - structures active participation to overcome gendered silence in the classroom

US College-based writing centre - as a place to address native rhetorical abilities

Sexual Identities article by Cynthia Nelson

How to develop gay friendly pedagogy?
Difference between queer theory and lesbian and gay approach as moving to inquiry rather than exclusion
The effects of homophobia
Sexual identity as already an integral part of ESL,
• how topic of gay/lesbian identities come up in ESL classrooms,
• what strategies are helpful in dealing with them,
• choices and challenges,
• and helpful strategies

Queer theory as problematizing all sexual identities see p. 374

• Shift from gay and lesbian to queer; socially constructed acts not facts - discursively produced through language and action; queer theory also looks at heterosexuality;
• sexual identity as central to cultural practices and discourses but only one variable, like gender, because identity is mutually inflecting
• gay/straight designation also acts as a form of social regulation/control

• p. 376 summary

• the problem of representation in pedagogies of inclusion (gay and lesbian model) reinforces minority status
• pedagogies of inquiry look at how language and culture work with regard to all sexual identities; more flexible in an intercultural context; teachers don’t have all the answers but work more at framing questions; can be discussed across many different topics; focus on analysis rather than advocacy; non-universalized identities in a local cultural context;

See questions on p. 378 Not what is “truth”, but the effects of “truth”

Case Studies

College/university ESL classrooms - Roxanne and her classroom discussion

Local context

Many interpretations

Not marginalizing or valorizing certain sexual identities
APPENDIX E

Group Questions for Discussion of Articles

Our next reading group will be

Friday, April 29th, 2005 from 3:30 - 5:00 pm at [Location]

See you then!

These are questions to consider when you are reading the articles and to guide your note-taking if you are using a reader response journal.

Thanks. You are contributing to the making of new and interesting knowledge!

• What makes this topic important to you?
• What related materials would you find useful in learning more about this topic?
• What ideas did you get from the article?
• Does this reading remind you of anything else?
• What other connections did you make?
• Did you find the reading interesting? If yes, why? If no, why?
• Do you disagree with anything the article presented?
• Would you recommend this reading to anyone else?
• Would you like to read more related to this topic?
• How do you see educational theory in relation to your work?
• How does your experience of teaching influence how you read research?
• Tell me about your experience of the reading group.
APPENDIX F

Media Awareness Questions for Feb 6, 2006 Meeting

Please find attached a list of newspaper articles from the teacher job action.

Our next meeting is:

Friday, December 2\textsuperscript{nd} at 3:30pm [location]

If you would like to consider some questions for our discussion, a place to start (and to use your reader response journal), is:

How accurate is the content?
What, if anything, is missing?
How are the “players” in the dispute portrayed?
Looking forward to another stimulating, inspiring discussion.
Bibliography


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http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/newsletter/11-02-06.htm#nofee (accessed March 5, 2007)


