Just Doing Our Jobs:
A Case Study of Literacy-in-Action in a Fifth Grade Literature Circle

KIM LENTERS
University of Calgary

Abstract

This case study examines the use of literature circles in a fifth grade classroom. Using the concept of *literacy-in-action*, it examines the question of why, in spite of critique, the use of defined student roles continues to dominate literature circle pedagogy. The study's examination of the interaction of people, objects, practices and meanings associated with this particular classroom's literature circles, demonstrates the way in which reliance on one particular literacy object, the role sheet, worked to radically alter the intended pedagogical purpose and meanings set out by those who first popularized literature circles. Through its travels to and from the fifth grade classroom, the role sheet accumulated an increasing status or power, along with a peculiar resistance to critique. The examination sheds light on the tensions and contradictions that arise when an instructional routine is transplanted from one context to another, a phenomenon occurring daily in classrooms worldwide. The findings illustrate the unintended consequences that arise when a literacy object is used as a proxy for the human mediation traditionally, and necessarily, associated with meaningful literacy pedagogies.

Deanne asks who has the Group Leader role today and one of the other girls says that she does. They all show each other the role sheets they have completed for their various roles. The sole boy in the group has not completed his work as Illustrator and the group reacts vocally. Deanne tells the Group Leader to write the boy's name down on the list for Ms. Wynn. Assuming her Group Leader /Read-Aloud Master role, one of the girls begins with, "Everyone turn to page three." She reads a paragraph aloud. She then tells the group to turn to chapter three, but Deanne interrupts with, "You have to tell us why you liked that passage." The group murmurs its acquiescence with Deanne's demand. The Group Leader begins to explain why she likes the passage and the boy gets up and leaves the table. Deanne says, "Now we have to stop." The boy comes back with Ms. Crawford, who tells the group that the Group Leader must remind people of what their jobs are for the session. The group complains to Ms. Crawford that the boy has not done his work and she tells him he must come prepared for each lit circle session. The boy sits down and the Group Leader tells the group to turn to chapter three. She reads the first paragraph and as she finishes, the boy asks, "What are we doing? Are we taking turns reading aloud?" The group makes noises of exasperation and Deanne tells the boy, "We are doing our jobs."

This vignette, drawn from one observational session of a five month study of literacy practices in a fifth grade classroom, describes focal student, Deanne, and her group engaging in their weekly literature circle. Literature circles or book discussion groups are widely used for literacy instruction in classrooms throughout North America. Harvey Daniels, the literacy researcher credited with disseminating the use of literature

circles in elementary school classrooms in North America describes them as follows: "'Literature circles' is not just a trendy label for any kind of small-group reading lesson– it stands for a sophisticated fusion of collaborative learning with independent reading, in the framework of reader response theory" (Daniels, 1994, pp.17-18). However, the scene described above hardly fits this description. The literature circle, characterized as a "sophisticated fusion" in one space, devolves into reading and "doing jobs" in another.

What is taking place in this fifth grade classroom that accounts for such disparity in conceptualization? Using the concept of *literacy-in-action* (Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Latour, 1996, I examine the question of why, in spite of critique, the use of defined student roles continues to dominate literature circle pedagogy. The study's examination of the interaction of people, objects, practices and meanings associated with this particular classroom's literature circles, demonstrates the way in which reliance on one particular literacy object, the role sheet, worked to radically alter the intended pedagogical purpose and meanings set out by those who first popularized literature circles. Through its travels to and from the fifth grade classroom, the role sheet accumulated an increasing status or power, along with a peculiar resistance to critique. The examination sheds light on the tensions and contradictions that arise when an instructional routine is transplanted from one context to another, a phenomenon occurring daily in classrooms worldwide. Findings illustrate the unintended consequences that arise when a literacy object is used as a proxy for the human mediation traditionally, and necessarily, associated with meaningful literacy pedagogies.

Framing the examination

This study is grounded in a sociocultural or social practice approach to literacy, which argues literacy is best conceptualized as an ideological process encompassing both the skills of learning to encode and decipher symbolic language and the social, political, cultural and linguistic complexities inherent to individuals and communities that shape their perceptions and uses of literacy. These understandings were drawn from numerous ethnographic studies (e.g., Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Heath, 1983; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1993) that later came to be grouped under the New Literacy Studies.

It is now recognized, however, that the early studies in the NLS, though rich and important for the insights they provide, may privilege human activity in literacy practices and bracket off other factors mediating an individual's or community's literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2005; Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Collins & Blot, 2003; Baynam & Prinsloo, 2009; Hamilton, 2001; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). One reason for this may be the way the primary unit of analysis used in the early studies, the literacy event (Heath, 1983), conceptualizes particular instantiations of literate practice as bounded and situated events. This unit of analysis does not account for the role material objects, such as texts, may be playing in human literate interactions. By bracketing off or isolating a particular "event" as a unit of study, this tradition actually turns a blind eye to the way literate practice in one context influences practice in another. Furthermore, in an increasingly globalized world connected by technologies of literacy, defining and isolating a situated practice of literacy is becoming increasingly more difficult. If people

are engaging in forms of literacy imported from distant spaces, what is the context in which they practice?

People and Objects: An Alternate Approach to Literacy Studies

In response to the above, an approach to literacy studies that includes human activity in literate practice and an inclusion of material forms of literacy that may be traced across interconnected local and global spaces is required (Barton & Hamilton, 2005; Baynam & Prinsloo, 2009; Collins & Blot, 2003; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007; Pahl & Rowsell, 2006; Reder & Davila, 2005; Street, 2003; Van Enk, Dagenais, & Toohey, 2005). Several studies (e.g., Bomer, 2007; Hamilton, 2001; Leander & Lovvorn, 2006; Michaels & Sohmer, 2000; Nichols, 2006; Pahl & Rowsell, 2006, 2010) utilize the concept of materiality to demonstrate the depth that may be added to literacy studies when the role of objects is brought under the theoretical lens of the NLS.

Actor-Network-Theory

Conceptions of materiality in literacy studies frequently draw on French sociologist, Bruno Latour (e.g., 1993, 2005), whose work argues for an understanding of science and technology as social practice. Latour's Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) uses the concept of networks and nodes and an ethnographic approach to trace material and human resources in order to gain an understanding of social processes. Latour argues that agency in framed social interactions rests in the activity of human beings *and* non-human objects. Objects are viewed as having agency in that they can operate alongside humans, and sometimes in place of them, to mediate and manage the activities of human actors. One illustration used by Latour (1996) situates this theory within a post office. In the example, Latour demonstrates the way that the counter, glass and grill not only act to physically separate the customer from the clerk and, thereby, provide protection for the clerk, they also work to symbolically enforce a power dynamic: the superiority and untouchable nature of the clerk. More modern post offices dispense with the glass and the grill, opting instead to use surveillance cameras. These objects work to construct the nature of the interaction the client has with the postal clerk, to set up and enforce a certain power dynamic.

In this theory, aspects of human agency are delegated to objects (termed *actants*) and it is objects/actants that connect local social interactions with the more global social structures to which they are attached. Continuing with the post office example, postal outlets within any particular nation tend to be close replicas of one another. An individual engaged in a social interaction, e.g., mailing a parcel, in a local post office, is not only connected to a larger social structure through interacting with the physical design and regulations imposed by the national postal authority, but also by sending that parcel through the postal system, actually connects the local institution to the global.

By investing the ability and power to act on their behalf in objects, actors in positions of authority, both at the local and global level, are able to extend their reaches. Returning to the post office, government regulations determine the kinds of materials that may be sent in a parcel through the national postal system. While unable to be present in every postal outlet, governing bodies enshrine these regulations in official warning posters found in all postal outlets. Postal patrons are expected to heed the warnings as

though there were a government official present at each outlet enforcing the regulations. ANT does not look to ascribe causal agency to objects, but it does argue that objects, through the roles and responsibilities delegated to them by humans, play an agentive role in creating or maintaining power relationships.

Literacy-in-action

Taking Actor-Network-Theory's notion of the mediation of objects in social interactions, Brandt & Clinton (2002) apply the theory to literacy studies in their article, *Limits of the Local*. They conceptualize objects involved with particular literacy interactions as technologies of literacy or *literacy objects*. A fundamental concept presented in the article is the unit of analysis, *literacy-in-action*, which is proposed to replace the literacy event (Heath, 1982): the construct of literacy-in-action intentionally carries a double-meaning, focusing attention on the way in which literacy itself acts as a social agent, in addition to examining the role of literacy in human activity. In this paper, I look at the ways people, objects, social contexts and practices work together to produce particular meanings in the literature circle as it is practiced in the fifth grade classroom. I accomplish this through the use of the unit of analysis, *literacy-in-action*.

Literature circles: Grand conversations about literature?

The birth of literature circles in elementary school classrooms is thought to have taken place in Chicago area schools where teachers familiar with Rosenblatt's reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978) wanted students to experience the natural, peer-led conversations about literature–much like adults' informal book clubs (Daniels, 1994; Eeds & Wells, 1989; Peterson & Eeds, 1990). Daniels (2002) highlights the popularity of literature circles in the following statement:

> What used to be a quiet, homegrown activity in a few scattered classrooms has become a trend, a boom, almost a fad. Now tens of thousands of teachers are doing something they call "literature circles" and many other teachers are using classroom activities that look very much the same, which they call "book clubs" or "reading groups." This means that now literally millions of students are involved in some kind of small, peer-led reading discussion group. (p.1)

Amongst those who promote literature circles in elementary classrooms, one of the primary pedagogical motivations is student-led discussion. However, not all literature circles engender the natural (Daniels, 1994, 2002) or grand conversations (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Peterson & Eeds, 1990) envisioned by early spokespersons for literature circles. Apart from the obvious explanation that students must have texts they find engaging in order to be interested in discussing a book, three explanations for this frequently appear in the research literature on literature circles: social relations amongst group members (Allen, Moller, & Stroup, 2003; Clarke & Holwadel, 2007; Lewis, 1997), the role of the teacher in literature circles (Allen, Moller, & Stroup, 2003; Maloch, 2003) and the use of defined student roles (Brownlie, 2005; Lloyd, 2004; Stien & Beed, 2004), the focus of this article.

Defined student roles as a naturalized feature of literature circles

Literature circle "roles" were created as a means of assisting teachers with the implementation of literature circles in their classrooms (Daniels 1994, 2002). Students are given photocopied role sheets (black line masters are found in Daniels' book) to guide them in taking on defined roles. The extant literature identifies the use of defined student roles as a problematic aspect of literature circles. Lloyd (2004), for example, cites "flat, oral recitation" (p.15) when her students used the role sheets to guide their discussion. Stien and Beed's (2004) work starts with the role sheets for its first phase and then for its second phase replaces the roles with tabbing to produce more natural talk than that which ensued when role sheets were employed. Daniels himself notes the problem of role sheets becoming "predominant in too many classrooms" (Daniels, 2006, p. 11). McMahon and Raphael (1995), as well as Gambrell and Almasi (1996) recognized this issue and provided alternate frameworks for conducting classroom literature circles. Brownlie's (2005), *Grand Conversations, Thoughtful Responses: A Unique Approach to Literature Circles,* notes the continuing use of student defined roles in classrooms and makes a point of offering a "unique approach" because of the contrived conversations they engender.

However, in spite of critiques dating back several years regarding their use in literature circles, defined roles for participation in literature discussions continue to be seen as a feature of student literature circles. As an indication of this, a search using the databases Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete and Teacher Reference Center located twelve articles on the use of literature circles in K-12 classrooms published in 2010. Out of the twelve articles, seven included the use of defined student roles based on Daniels (1994) roles as central features of literature circles (Bussell, 2010; Certo, Moxley, Reffitt & Miller, 2010; Devick-Fry & LeSage, 2010; Kilbane & Milman, 2010; Pearson, 2010; Watson, 2010). The casual reference each of these articles makes to the use of defined student roles suggests a kind of naturalization of their use; that is, for many, role sheets are a regular and expected part of literature circles. Why is this so? Using the concept of literacy-in-action examine at this phenomenon provides insights into why, in spite of critique, the use of defined student roles continues to dominate literature circle pedagogy.

Research method

I draw on a larger study that examined literacy practices in a fifth grade classroom (Lenters, 2009) for this paper. Case study with ethnographic methods was employed. The question taken up in this article asks: How can the inclusion of literacy objects as actants in literate interactions provide a means for understanding a popular pedagogical tool as it is utilized in a classroom?

Context and participants

The research took place in an urban area of western Canada, a region similar to many locales in the developed world, where accountability measures had recently been introduced to the public education system. The study was set in a middle-class, urban, fifth-grade classroom. Participants in the study included six focal students (Deanne, Riley, Ally, Sara, Nigel and Isaac) and two of their teachers (Ms. Wynn and Ms.

Crawford) (all pseudonyms). The focal students were not specifically selected but were the group of students from the class of twenty-five who volunteered to have their communicational practices, in school and out of school, examined. The fifth grade class was part of a blended fourth/fifth grade group of sixty students, team taught by two teachers (Ms. Wynn and Ms. Little). Ms. Wynn, the fifth grade teacher, and Ms. Crawford, the school's teacher-librarian, shared responsibility for facilitating the weekly fifth grade literature circles. Ms. Wynn and Ms. Crawford had both completed graduate level professional degrees prior to the study.

The model for literature circles employed in this classroom was set out as follows: Students were to rotate through a set of six roles that were directed toward teaching them how to conduct literary discussions or book talks. The roles used in this class were titled: Group Leader/Read-Aloud Master; Discussion Leader; Problem Solver; Connection Maker; Sequencer; and Illustrator (see Figure 2 for examples).   The groups were to collectively decide which novel their group would read from the various sets of novels in the classroom and school library. As a group, they were to independently divide the reading of the novel into six sections to correspond with the six roles and decide each week who would take on each role, rotating through the roles so that each of the six group members had a chance to play each role over the course of reading the novel. When the novel was completed, the process started again.

Data Sources and Analysis

In order to obtain an understanding of the literature circles in the fifth grade classroom, I used three sources of data collection: field notes from classroom observations; semi-structured and impromptu interviews with teachers and students and; document analysis. Students' written work in conjunction with the literature circles provided a secondary source of data. The observations and interviews were conducted over a five month period.

To determine which documents to analyze, I asked the teachers about the resources they used to shape their literature circle pedagogy. The only resources the teachers reported having consulted were written texts coming from three distinct sources: the literacy pedagogy research community, publishers of teacher how-to texts, and documents from the province's Ministry of Education. In the data analysis, each of these resources came to represent a space associated with the classroom literacy instruction.   I used the unit of analysis, literacy-in-action, to analyze the data. This unit of analysis looks at how readers and writers mediate their social world through their literate practice and, simultaneously, how literacy, often in the form of an object, is playing a role in the interaction. I elaborated the framework proposed by Brandt and Clinton (2002) for use in analyzing classroom literacy practices. To accomplish this, I first connected the enactment of the literature circle in a local classroom to the global spaces that played a role in shaping the literature circle pedagogy used in that classroom, building on Brandt and Clinton's contention that local literacy practices are not isolated but always shaped, to some extent, in distant spaces. This comprised the local-global framework on which to conduct the rest of the analysis (figure 1). Next, I identified the literacy objects that connected the local literature circles to the more global educational structure by examining the characteristics of literature circles as conceptualized across the connected

spaces. I identified two literacy objects as major players in the literature circle: the novels students read and the role sheet. However, for the purposes of this paper I examine only the agentive activity of the role sheet. Finally, using the unit of analysis, *literacy-objects-in-action*, I looked at the way local actors (teachers and students) were engaged with the literacy object and, in turn, how that literacy object played an agentive role in students' literacy lives. Table 1 represents this final stage of the analysis and presents the characteristics of the literacy object, the role sheet, as represented across the connected spaces.

Findings

In the fifth grade literature circles examined in this paper, two literacy objects dominate: the novels read by the students and the role sheets they filled out prior to the literature circle. When the novels and role sheets did not inspire the students to come prepared for their literature circles with written role work, three more literacy objects (participation lists, an "unfinished homework" board and report cards) were added to motivate and provide final monitoring. In consideration of space limitations, I examine one literacy object, the role sheet, and the students and teachers' interaction with it in the fifth grade classroom. By opting to focus solely on one object, my intention is not to negate the role of other literacy objects or human interactions in the literature circle. Rather, I have chosen this rhetorical move for this article to allow a fine-grained analysis and promote future studies that incorporate an examination of the role of objects in literate interactions.

I structure the findings around the notion of inherent capacities of literacy objects (Brandt & Clinton, 2002): their capacity to travel; to stay intact as they travel; and their capacity to be "visible and animate outside the interactions of immediate literacy events" (p. 344). While these abilities were observed in the literacy object featured in this paper, a fourth capacity also became evident in the study: the literacy object's capacity to resist critique. I was interested in the manner in which student literacy is mediated by activity outside their own situated practice of literacy and the way that mediation may be made visible. Therefore, I chose to examine the capacities of one of the prominent literacy objects in the fifth grade literature circle, the role sheet, and the way these capacities influence the school literacy practices of six focal students.

The role sheet travels

The role sheet was not invented in the fifth grade classroom: it arrived from somewhere else. As I traced the connected spaces from the classroom outward through the educational structure to which it was connected, it became obvious that this object had traveled through considerable time and distance before its arrival. First conceived in the United States, the object could be observed in action in this local Canadian classroom nearly two decades later. In literature circles that utilize roles, originally meant to assist teachers with the implementation of literature circles (Daniels, 1994), students are given photocopied role sheets (black line masters are found in the Daniels 1994 & 2002 texts) to guide them, specifically to scaffold book talk when students are first involved with literature circles.
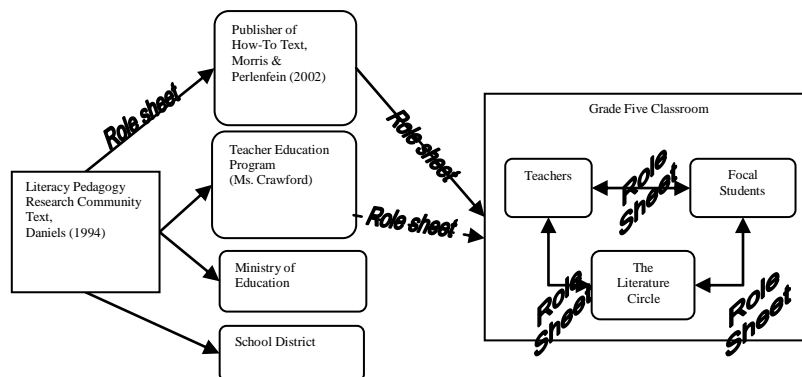
Publisher of How-To Text, Morris & Perlenfein (2002)

Teacher Education Program (Ms. Crawford)

Literacy Pedagogy Research Community Text, Daniels (1994)

Ministry of Education

School District

Grade Five Classroom

Teachers

Focal Students

The Literature Circle

Role sheet

Role sheet

Role sheet

Role sheet

Role sheet

Role sheet

Figure 1. The network by which the role sheet traveled

In the present case, the role sheet was assisted in its travels to the fifth grade classroom by a number of actors and actants, primarily print sources (see Figure 1). The classroom teacher, Ms. Wynn had observed the use of the literature circle in use in other classrooms and reported knowing of the recommendation to include literature circles in language arts instruction in a provincial Ministry of Education document (BC Ministry of Education, 2002). She turned to a teacher how-to text (Morris & Perlenfein, 2003) to learn how to implement the pedagogical interaction. This text was the only source of information Ms. Wynn reported using for constructing her literature circles and is typical of the kinds of teacher guides that publishers, such as Scholastic and Teacher Created Materials, put out to offer simplified versions of pedagogical innovations coming from the literacy pedagogy community. (Ms. Crawford had read the Daniels (1994) text but did not assist in the planning of the literature circles–only the implementation.) In the how-to text used by Ms. Wynn, one particular pedagogical text, *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* (Daniels, 1994), is cited often. The how-to text comes complete with reproducible materials, including fifty-one pages of role sheets, ready-made for classroom use. Here, role sheets are characterized as necessary for successful book discussions. Having used some of them the previous year and finding the roles too complex for students, Ms. Wynn developed her own package of role sheets the year the study took place (see Figure 2 for examples). The way the role sheets developed by Ms. Wynn are taken almost verbatim from a teacher how-to text suggests that the publisher of this text is an influential actor mediating the role the literacy object would play in Ms. Wynn's classroom.

As it traveled through multiple spaces to arrive in the fifth grade class, the role sheet demonstrated the transcontextual nature of literacy in a local classroom: literacy, as conceptualized by someone else in distant spaces, was being practiced in a local sphere.

Figure 2. The first two role sheets in the fifth grade literature circle booklet

The role sheet travels intact

While it is noteworthy that the literacy object traveled across time and location, through various spaces connected to the fifth grade classroom, more remarkable is the high degree to which it traveled *intact* to this location.

Several of the specific roles used in the classroom bore remarkable resemblance to the role sheets produced by Harvey Daniels (1994), a curious phenomenon given that Ms. Wynn had never read Daniels' work on literature circles and Ms. Crawford had no part in constructing the role sheets in use in the fifth grade classroom. Ms. Wynn had exercised her own agency in constructing a package of role sheets based on a teacher how-to text (Morris & Perlenfein, 2003); yet Daniels' hand in forming the roles for discussion in literature circles was without doubt seen in the names and descriptions of roles that were in use in this fifth grade class (e.g., Daniels' *Discussion Director* is *Discussion Leader* in the fifth grade class, *Connector* is *Connection Maker*). Thus, while the role sheet had passed through at least two spaces where its use was reconceptualized, it was completely recognizable in the classroom as an object that emanated from a specific and distant source. The highly intact nature of the role sheet, once it reached the classroom space, becomes more remarkable in light of efforts over the intervening years to modify the object itself or the use of it in the intermediary spaces between the literacy pedagogy research space and the classroom.

One might assume that with the amount of time and geographical distance separating the space in which the literacy object was created, and the renditions it has been taken through in the intermediary spaces between the literacy pedagogy community and the classroom, the role sheet would have become much less recognizable in the

classroom space. The spaces are far more numerous than those accessed by Ms. Wynn. For example, a quick search on the World Wide Web reveals numerous websites devoted to literature circles, many of them providing a selection of role sheets for teachers to download. Also, her local school board offered workshops on literature circles, which Ms. Wynn did not attend. Numerous possibilities for altering the literacy object exist in spaces such as these. In spite of this potential, the observation that much of the role sheet's final form in the fifth grade class was not a significant alteration of that found in the literacy pedagogy community, from which it originated, clearly demonstrates Brandt and Clinton's contention that literacy objects travel and often endure with surprising resiliency.

Part of the intact nature of this literacy object may relate to its unquestioned place in the instructional routine as it was enacted in the local classroom. Table 1 illustrates the transformation of thought regarding the place of role sheets in the classroom literature circle across the spaces connected to the fifth grade classroom. In the classroom itself, five of the six focal students defined the literature circle as consisting only of two components: reading the novel and completing the role work. Riley's description, almost identical to Deanne's, is typical: "What literature circles are is you read a book and then you have three jobs…or more, don't know. You've got Read-Aloud Master, Discussion Leader, Problem Solver, Connection Maker, Sequencer and Illustrator." For the majority of the six focal students, the roles were synonymous with the literature circle.

Table 1
Characteristics of the Role Sheet across Connected Spaces

	Literacy Pedagogy Community (Daniels, 1994; 2004)	Ministry of Education (BC Ministry of Education, 2002, 2006)	Publisher/ Teacher How-To Text (Morris & Perlenfein, 2003)	Classroom	
				Teachers Ms. Wynn & Ms. Crawford	Students Deanne, Riley, Ally, Sara, Nigel, & Isaac
The Role Sheet	-An innovation created by Daniels (1994). -Temporary scaffolds to foster discussion skills. -Teacher surrogate – temporary scaffold (Daniels, 1994, 2002).	-Lit circles recommended but no mention of roles or role sheets.	-Cited as integral to the lit circle. -Conversation originates from them. -Provide purpose for reading. -Written role work can be used, along with other projects, to assess student performance.	-Characterized as "jobs" and integral part of lit circle. -How-to text's version of role sheets seen as complicated, requiring revision. -Vigor and productivity of lit circle judged by student completion of written role work and how they listen to other members read role work. -All lit circle grading based on completion of role sheets.	-Roles understood as "jobs." -Dictate all of the book talk. -Function as oral and written worksheets. -Participation in lit circle meetings judged by students solely on whether peers completed role work, whether that work accorded with specifications of role sheet.

The role sheet remains visible and animate outside the immediate literacy event

The role sheet's increasingly accepted presence as a member of the literature circle as it traveled intact from distant locations to local situations hints at the power accumulated in it in this classroom. In this study, the role sheet went from being one aspect of a instructional routine in the literacy pedagogy research space to becoming an inviolable feature in the publishing space of teacher how-to texts and in the classroom. Or, in other words, not only did it remain intact as it traveled but more responsibility was accumulated in it. Brandt and Clinton (2002) state that literacy objects have the ability "to remain visible and animate outside the literacy event" (p. 344). This contention becomes clear in the following section through the manner in which the role sheet was used to extend the reach of the teacher and the resulting displacement of certain literacy practices.

The role sheet was given the responsibility of replacing the teacher in the literature circle. Once the students learned how to use the role sheets, Ms. Wynn and Ms. Crawford felt that they had all of the tools needed to conduct literature discussions that were appropriate for their age and level of maturity. With the role sheet actively taking their place, the teachers were able to employ small group instruction for sixty students without having to interact on a pedagogical level with the individual groups. There were simply too many children for it to be possible for Ms. Wynn or Ms. Crawford to join in all the individual literature circle groups, even on a weekly basis. Rather, they relied on the literacy object, the role sheet, to fill their place (in addition to relying on other objects such as the novels to motivate students and non-compliance lists, the unfinished homework board and report cards to enforce participation).

Vested with the responsibility of teaching the students how to conduct literature discussions, the role sheet not only worked in the immediate context of the literature circle, it also served as a means for ensuring the students were on task and provided a system for grading the students, freeing the teacher from the necessity of observing or interviewing the students for assessment purposes. Students who had not completed the role work, as set out on the role sheet, were reported to Ms. Wynn by the Discussion Leader via another literacy object, the non-compliance list. Thus, used as one tool for monitoring, the role sheet allowed the teacher to keep tabs on students on a weekly basis without observing them or frequently collecting their work. Furthermore, the written role work was turned in for grading purposes at the completion of each novel and formed the sole means of assessing students' participation in the literature circle for their report cards.

Undoubtedly, there is an enhancement to classroom instruction through the use of literacy objects. The teachers in this class were able to offer potentially rich literacy pedagogy to a large group of diverse students and were able to hybridize it through altering the function of the role sheet to fit requirements of accountability that had to be incorporated into their classroom practice. However, the displaced surveillance inherent to their use of the role sheet is a concern.

Literature circles were originally introduced to the elementary school classroom to allow students to aesthetically appreciate literature and provide them with an opportunity to discuss literature in student-run groups (Peterson & Eeds, 1991). The curriculum set out by the Ministry of Education in this region echoes these aspirations.

The teachers saw it as an opportunity for students to experience books they might not otherwise have read (Ms. Crawford) and hoped the work associated with the literature circle would encourage students to "take a critical eye to a novel" (Ms. Wynn).

Aesthetic experiences with literature, grand conversations or critical literacy were literacy practices, however, that did not happen in this classroom. Role sheets worked to displace these intentions. For the students, doing their "jobs" meant reading the role sheets aloud, unless they were the Group Leader/Read-Aloud Master, in which case the task of telling others when to read out their role work and recording names of errant students were added to the job. Doing their jobs did not mean using the role sheets as springboards to unscripted conversation about books. Engaging in literate discussions became synonymous with reading the work they had done for the role sheet.

This held true even for Isaac, one focal student, who understood that the conversation should be more than this. Here Isaac is explaining to me what the literature circles are all about:

> So there's a couple tasks. You read the book which usually most of the people seem not to like and …you kind of …talk about the book. You read a couple chapters, then you do a role on it. And then kind of during the period you talk about it with the rest of your group, even though it's not that exciting.

Though he lamented the fact that more lively discussions didn't take place, he too read his role work out as his contribution to the discussion and only occasionally tried to provoke conversation through tricky questions (when he had the Discussion Leader role). Riley also used the Discussion Leader role in the same manner, though she did not see the literature circle as an opportunity to engage in unscripted conversations about the books. It was the role sheet designating them as Discussion Leader, however, which determined when these two could try to provoke conversation in this way. Furthermore, the only animated talk I observed over the course of fifteen literature circle sessions involved criticism regarding the adequacy of others' role work (the scenario presented at the opening of the article is but one example of the continued criticism that took place in Deanne, Riley and Ally's group, as well as Sara and Nigel's). Rather than the novel, the role sheet was one object sitting squarely in the center of this activity, mediating the conversation, displacing students' interest in having "lively" conversations about books. So the question remains; would the controlled discussions promoted by the role sheet would nonetheless have dampened enthusiasm for discussing even the most engaging of novels?

Another aspect of the role sheet's mediational capacity to displace literacy practices was the way it directed the reading of the novel for at least two of the focal students. Isaac, a self-professed avid reader, preferred to read a novel as a whole, sometimes in a very short space of time. In the context of the literature circle, this was treated as somehow disrespectful to his group and at cross-purposes with the way literature circles "should" be conducted. On two separate occasions, I observed Ms. Crawford explicitly telling him that reading ahead ruined the "predictions" required by one of the role sheets (the Problem Solver role). Sara, a "reluctant" reader, took a different approach to the novel being read by her group by reading for short stints and

then stopping to fill in her role sheet when she came across a section that was appropriate to the task of her assigned role. Sara's manner of reading to fulfill the requirements of her weekly role, rather than reading the chapters for enjoyment and later addressing her role work, may have led her to view literature through a very narrow lens, to see engaging with a novel as an exercise in reading to fill in the blanks. This was evidenced in a statement she made when I asked her if she was enjoying the new novel her group was reading. Her response was that she didn't like the book because she couldn't "find any interesting questions to ask", a direct reference to the Discussion Leader role she was to fulfill that week. For these two students, the role sheet most clearly mediated their reading of the novels, displacing aesthetically oriented practices in which they either normally engaged or could have engaged and, instead, involving them in a highly artificial form of novel reading.

The agentive activity of the role sheet as a literacy object, indeed, reached beyond the immediate literacy event, the weekly literature circle, in which it was used. This activity is seen in the way that responsibility was delegated to the role sheet, effectively extending the reach of the teacher and both enhancing and displacing particular literacy practices through the teaching, monitoring and assessment roles it was given.

The role sheet becomes immune to critique

The resiliency of this literacy object as it traveled suggests an additional capacity it had taken on: an apparent immunity to critique. The particular findings related to role sheets presented here are not necessarily new: Daniels wrote on numerous occasions about the difficulties of using role sheets as anything more than temporary scaffolds and supported teachers who had decided to do away with them altogether (e.g., Daniels, 2003, 2006). This represents but one source of critique made regarding the literacy object examined in this study – many others have been put forward (e.g., Brownlie, 2005; Lloyd, 2004; Stien & Beed, 2004). However, published concerns regarding the use of the role sheet in literature circles did not seem to influence the enactment of the literature circle in this fifth grade classroom.

In the press of time, fostered by an ever-expanding curriculum and growing class sizes, combined with the pressure to have students produce work that could be graded for reporting purposes, the literacy object was given a role that effectively allowed it to negate any concerns connected to it. By delegating certain responsibilities to the role sheet, such as teaching, monitoring and assessment, the teachers were enabled to handle large groups of students in a less than ideal physical classroom set up. But in doing so, they may have actually strengthened this literacy object's immunity to critique.

Ms. Wynn chose to use a simplified manual on literature circles, such as the teacher how-to text (Morris & Perlenfein, 2003), as her only resource to guide her use of this instructional routine in her classroom. However, not only did this text provide a simplified and, therefore, more readily applied pedagogy, it is also a text in which no critique of the literacy object is found. This text's presentation of the role sheet as a straightforward, uncontested object may not only have ensured that its form and/or content would be taken up in the classroom; it also worked to strengthen the immunity to critique that this literacy object experienced once it reached the literature circles of the fifth grade classroom.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to address the question of why, in spite of critique, the use of defined student roles continues to dominate literature circle pedagogy. However, the findings have wider implications that apply to numerous instructional routines used in classrooms and their associated objects. In this particular classroom, responsibility for teaching, participation and assessment in the literature circle was delegated by certain human actors to literacy objects. One of these objects, the role sheet, conceived in distant places and having acquired new responsibilities as it traveled, became a powerful player, not only in the immediate enactment of the literature circle but also outside of those immediate events. The role sheet's unquestioned presence as an integral part of this instructional routine meant that it came to be synonymous with the literature circle in this classroom, an inviolable feature, well-positioned to remain immune to critique.

The sheer popularity of role sheets for the way they simplify and facilitate the use of literature circles in elementary school classrooms works to keep these objects in circulation, in spite of critique. Herein lies an example of the way local literacies and pedagogies are not only mediated by objects created in global spaces but also work in return to influence global practices. As teachers use materials, such as role sheets, by buying how-to books in which they are available for reproduction or by downloading them from websites that record the fact they have been accessed, they create a demand for these literacy objects. Demand, in turn, creates an ethos of the utility of such objects and lends the object an overlay of credibility. Through the popularity and resulting wide circulation created by those who use them, role sheets are given the capacity to rise above concern regarding the reductive learning they promote.

Elementary classrooms employ numerous pedagogical tools for literacy instruction–writer's workshop, reader's workshop, literature circles, sustained silent reading, text-types and comprehension strategy instruction–programs that were all considered pedagogical innovations with extensive theoretical support, when first introduced to classrooms. Frequently, as these tools become popularized, materials to support the pedagogy are produced (e.g., peer editing forms for writer's workshop, text-type forms for genre studies or posters and bookmarks listing reading comprehension strategies). Over time, in classrooms where teachers may be pressed for time or may lack knowledge of the theoretical background to the tools, many of these materials may come to be used in a manner as reductive as the role sheets in the fifth grade classroom examined in this study. In an era of increasing summative assessment in elementary schools, this is particularly likely.

Examining pedagogy by looking at the capacities of literacy objects may be helpful in both pre-service and in-service teacher education programs. By grounding teachers in the theory associated with pedagogical tools for literacy instruction, teacher education programs can assist new teachers in avoiding the trap of confusing engagement with an associated literacy object as engagement with the pedagogy itself. Conversely, helping teachers to see pedagogical tools, such as basal reading programs, as literacy objects that have a capacity to mediate young readers' literate lives may help teachers in locales where such texts are mandated for use in literacy programs to look for ways to

reduce the basal reader's negative impact. At the very least, teachers could be led to resist the one-size-fits-all approach to literacy instruction promoted by the scripted teacher's guide accompanying the program. Literacy objects for classroom pedagogy are created to simplify the task of teaching. Teachers obviously use them, as they continue to abound in networks disseminating teacher materials. Literacy researchers lament the way these objects reduce rich pedagogies to fill-in-the-blank exercises but with seemingly little effect on the degree to which they are used in classrooms. A focus on the meditational capacities of these objects could provide teacher educators with a new means for enabling teachers to look at such practices critically.

Conclusion

Instructional routines, such as the literature circle, do not suddenly appear in local classrooms. They are produced in distant spaces and make their way to the classroom via a variety of literacy objects. In this case, it was a particular literacy object, the role sheet, which connected literature circle pedagogy in distant spaces to the local classroom. While the role sheet may have been created as a benign and uncomplicated pedagogical tool, as it traveled through spaces within the educational structure, it became an actant that mediated the experiences of human actors in the local spaces to which it traveled. Through its endowed mediational capacities, the role sheet, as a literacy object, came to be synonymous with the literature circle and accentuated reductive practices of teaching and learning in the fifth grade literacy program. In this way, the role sheet came to play a part far different from that intended by those who initially conceptualized it.

The findings illuminated by the concept of literacy-in-action highlight at least one mechanism by which rich pedagogies become victims of their own success: the tendency over time for the pedagogy to become dependent on associated literacy objects, eventually becoming overshadowed by those objects in some contexts. The findings of this paper may help educators better understand what happens to pedagogical tools as they are translated from the space of researchers interested in literacy pedagogy to a local classroom. Classrooms are replete with instructional routines connected to literacy learning, many of which have particular literacy objects associated with them, e.g., literature circles and role sheets, guided reading and leveled readers, sustained silent reading and response journals, writers workshop and writers notebooks, to name just a few. Literacy-in-action provides a means for critically scrutinizing our use of use of these go-to instructional routines, recognizing the challenges of implementing them in schools, and understanding of the way in which pedagogies, rich in the ivory tower, come to be implemented in reduced ways in local classrooms. As highlighted in this study, unintended consequences arise when a literacy object is used as a proxy for the kind of human input that has been traditionally and necessarily associated with certain literacy pedagogies.

References

Allen, J., Moller, K. & Stroup, D. (2003). "Is this some kind of soap opera?": A tale of two readers across four literature discussion contexts. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, *19*, 225-251.

Barton, D., & Hamilton, M. (2000). Literacy practices. In D. Barton, M. Hamilton & R. Ivanic (Eds.), *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context* (pp. 7-15). New York: Routledge.

Barton, D., & Hamilton, M. (2005). Literacy, reification, and the dynamics of social interaction. In D. Barton & K. Tusting (Eds.), *Beyond communities of practice: Language, power and social context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Barton, D., Hamilton, M., & Ivanic, R. (2000). *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context*. London: Routledge.

Baynham, M., & Prinsloo, M. (2009). *The future of literacy studies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

BC Ministry of Education. (2002). *British Columbia performance standards: Reading*. Province of British Columbia.

BC Ministry of Education. (2006). *English language arts grade 5: Integrated resource package*. Province of British Columbia.

Bomer, R. (2007). When writing leads: An activity-theoretic account of the literate activity of first-graders stronger at writing than reading. In D.W. Rowe, R. T. Jimenez, D. L. Compton, D. K. Dickinson, Y. Kim, K. M. Leander, V. J. Risko (Eds.), *56th Yearbook of the National Reading Conference* (pp. 151-163). Oak Creek, WI: National Reading Conference, Inc.

Brandt, D. & Clinton, K. (2002). Limits of the local: Expanding perspectives on literacy as a social practice. *Journal of Literacy Research, 34*(3), 337-356.

Brownlie, F. (2005). *Grand conversations, thoughtful responses*. Winnipeg, Manitoba: Portage and Main Press.

Bussell, E. R. (2010). Literature circles in the library. *School Librarian's Workshop, 30*(6), 17-18.

Carger, C. L. (2004). Art and literacy with bilinugal children. *Language Arts, 81*(4), 283-292.

Certo, J., Moxley, K., Reffitt, K., & Miller, J. A. (2010). I learned how to talk about a book: Children's perceptions of literature circles across grade and ability levels. *Literacy Research and Instruction, 49*(3), 243.

Clarke, L. W., & Holwadel, J. (2007). "Help! What is wrong with these literature circles and how can we fix them?" *The Reading Teacher, 61*(1), 20-29.

Collins, J., & Blot, R. K. (2003). *Literacy and literacies: Texts, power, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Daniels, H. (1994). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in the student-centered classroom*. York, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers.

Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Daniels, H. (2006). What's the next big thing with literature circles? *Voices from the Middle, 13*(4), 10-15.

Devick-Fry, J., & LeSage, T. (2010). Science literacy circles: Big ideas about science. *Science Activities, 47*(2), 35.

Eeds, M., & Wells, D. (1989). Grand conversations: An exploration of meaning construction in literature study groups. *Research in the teaching of English, 23*, 4-29.

Gambrell, L., & Almasi, J. (Eds.). (1996). *Lively discussions! Fostering engaged reading*. Newark, DE: IRA.

Hamilton, M. (2001). Privileged literacies: Policy, institutional process and the life of the IALS. *Language and Education, 15*(2 & 3), 178-196.

Harmon, J. M. (1998). Vocabulary teaching and learning in a seventh-grade literature-based classroom. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 41*(7), 518-530.

Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Kilbane, C. R., & Milman, N. B. (2010). Using literature circles to provide support for online discussions. *Distance Learning, 7*(2), 65.

Latour, B. (1993). *We have never been modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Latour, B. (1996). On interobjectivity. *Mind, Culture, and Activity: An International Journal*   Retrieved September 18, 2008, from http://www.bruno-latour.fr/articles/article/063.html

Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network-theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Leander, K. M., & Lovvorn, J. F. (2006). Literacy networks: Following the circulation of texts, bodies, and objects in the schooling and online gaming of one youth. *Cognition and Instruction*, *24*(3), 291-340.

Lenters, K. (2009). *Exploring 'Limits of the Local': A Case Study of Literacy-in-Action in a Contemporary Intermediate Classroom.* Unpublished doctoral thesis. The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.

Lewis, C. (1997). The social drama of literature discussions in a fifth/sixth-grade classroom. *Research in the teaching of English, 31*(2), 163-204.

Lewis, C., Enciso, P., & Moje, E. B. (Eds.). (2007). *Reframing sociocultural research on literacy*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Lloyd, S. L. (2004). Using comprehension strategies as a springboard for student talk. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 48*(2), 114-124.

Maloch, B. (2003). One teacher's journey: Transitioning into literature discussion groups. *Language Arts*, 81(4), 312-322.

McMahon, S. L., & Raphael, T. E. (Eds.). (1995). *The book club connection: Literacy learning and classroom talk*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Michaels, S., & Sohmer, R. (2000). Narratives and inscriptions: Cultural tools, power and powerful sense-making. *In* B. Cope & M. Kalantzis, (eds.) Multiliteracies: *Literacy learning and the design of social futures*. New York: Routledge.

Moller, K. J. (2002). Providing support for dialogue in literature discussions about social justice. *Language Arts*, 467-477.

Morris, B., & Perlenfein, D. (2003). *Literature circles: The way to go and how to get there*. Westminster, CA: Teacher Created Materials.

Nichols, S. (2006). From boardroom to classroom: Teaching a globalised discourse on thinking through internet texts and teaching practices. In K. Pahl & J. Rowsell (Eds.), *Travel notes from the new literacy studies* (pp. 173-194). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Pahl, K., & Rowsell, J. (Eds.). (2006). *Travel notes from the new literacy studies: Instances of practice*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Pahl, K., & Rowsell, J. (2010). *Artifactual Literacies: Every Object Tells a Story*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Pearson, C. (2010). Acting up or acting out? Unlocking children's talk in literature circles. *Literacy, 44*(1), 3.

Peterson, R., & Eeds, M. (1990). *Grand conversations: Literature groups in action*. Richmond Hill, Canada: Scholastic.

Reder, S., & Davila, R. (2005). Context and literacy practices. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 25*, 170-187.

Rosenblatt, L. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Southern Illinois Press.

Scollon, R., & Scollon, S. (1981). *Narrative, literacy, and face in interethnic communication*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Scribner, S., & Cole, M. (1981). *The psychology of literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Stien, D., & Beed, P. L. (2004). Bridging the gap between fiction and non-fiction in the literature circle setting. *The Reading Teacher, 57*(6), 510-518.

Street, B. V. (1993). Introduction: The new literacy studies. In B. V. Street (Ed.), *Cross-cultural approaches to literacy* (pp. 1-21). Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

Street, B. V. (2003). What's "new" in the new literacy studies? Critical approaches to literacy and practice. *Current Issues in Comparative Education, 5*(2), 1-14.

Van Enk, A., Dagenais, D., & Toohey, K. (2005). A socio-cultural perspective on school-based literacy research: Some emerging considerations. *Language and Education*, *19*(6), 496-512.

Watson, D. C. (2010). Exploring social connectivity through the use of adolescent queer literature. *American Journal of Sexuality Education, 5*(3), 268.

Author Biography
Kimberly Lenters is an assistant professor in the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary. Her research focuses primarily on ways in which sociocultural perspectives of multimodal literacy may be utilized to understand and enhance the literacy development of young students in-school and out-of-school.