

Language and Literacies as Joyful Possibilities: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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This special issue emerges from the 2024 preconference of the Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada (LLRC) entitled *Language and Literacies as Joyful Possibilities*. When we issued the call for the preconference, we invited scholars of language and literacies to consider the ways in which joy features in their teaching, learning, and/or research. We identified the theme as essential in our contemporary context, highlighting as one example the ways that machine algorithms have become proxy teachers, shaping language and literacy practices that lead to anxiety, fear, loneliness, division, hatred, and violence.

As we got closer to the preconference date, we could see the growing need for joyful literacies as conference organizers at McGill had to relocate us to a new venue due to a labour dispute and conflicts that were escalating about the encampments on campus due to the war in Gaza. Registrants for the preconference navigated difficult choices in whether to attend, and we acknowledge with respect those who chose not to. Those who came also grappled with the ethical question about how to talk about joy in these times responsibly. As one attendee wondered prior to the preconference, “can joy be a form of resistance?” We offered framings of the power and purpose of joy in learning from Indigenous scholar Marie Battiste (2010) and literacy scholar Goldhy Muhammad (2023) as ways of holding space for this question. The keynote address by Dr. Kathy Hibbert (published in this issue) also gave us many examples from her long and distinguished career as a teacher and scholar about the joyful and empowering results when we work expansively and collectively to nurture multiliteracies in life-long learning.

The LLRC preconference has traditionally been a way of bringing exquisite attention (Lather, 2007) to support work in progress on the preconference theme, with opportunity to publish in a special issue of *Language & Literacy*. As the organizers of the 20th preconference and editors of this issue, we see its work nurturing both the authors of these papers, and readers looking for examples of joyful possibility to inspire their teaching or research.

It was important for us to centre our own understandings of joy in our approach to organizing the preconference and editing this issue. For us, joy is a state of being that often

co-exists with deeply unhappy situations but has the power to outlast and overcome them, because it flows from a sense of belonging, value, and hope that sustains well-being. From the outset, we took an inclusive approach, welcoming work by students as well as established scholars, work that invited different genre of academic writing, and work that encouraged reflections on pedagogy and personal learning as much as traditional forms of research in language and literacy. We also took a mentoring stance editorially, holding an online follow up session for preconference participants to answer questions about potential submissions, and making decisions to accept papers based on what would be most supportive to authors in the current stage of their work. While sometimes this meant saying ‘not yet’ to manuscripts, more often it meant curating the feedback of peer reviewers so it would be of most use in revision, offering in some cases more editorial direction. One of the challenges of blind peer review in a special issue is that reviewers are often ‘blind’ to the broader context of the work. We are very proud of the authors and feel invested in the ideas communicated. We next introduce the papers in this issue and the joyful possibilities they share.

Joyful Possibilities for Making Meaning

The issue opens with Kathy Hibbert’s keynote address from the preconference. Kathy frames the preconference theme in a call to remember our purpose as language and literacy educators:

As educators, we’re in the people business. And people—our students, our colleagues, ourselves—are hurting ... At the heart of this issue lies the question: What is the purpose of a language and literacy education? Is it to produce solely measurable outcomes, or to engage students in meaningful, joyful learning that empowers them to participate in society?

Dr. Hibbert reflects on her 40-plus year journey as a teacher, teacher educator, and curriculum scholar, sharing what she has learned about nurturing collective resilience to replace narrowed versions of literacy with the joyful possibilities of multiliteracies. Her address powerfully links the experiences of division and chaos in our world with the latest pendulum swing of ‘the reading wars,’ confronting these realities with the wisdom of redwood trees who bolster one another’s root systems, and the ageless truth that it is our multiple and aesthetic capacities for meaning-making that foster freedom, connection, and well-being across life-spans and circumstances. She calls on us to avoid negativity as a distraction and focus our positive energies on “our awesome responsibility” to “set down the roots of understanding through stories, music, arts, movement—even those very small gestures convey so much meaning over the lifespan. We are meaning makers, and in that process, there is great joy to be found.”

These ideas go to the heart of our own understandings as literacies educators and researchers, reflecting a way of seeing purpose in language and literacy teaching and scholarship that resonates through the work of the other authors in this issue.

Each paper takes up one or more of these themes of language and literacies as joyful practices that develop connection, empowerment, and well-being. Sometimes this was by design, as authors used concepts of joy shared in the literature as an organizing pedagogical principle or object of analysis in research. Others contributed because joy was a surprise that emerged in the course of their research or teaching, in keeping with its nature to sometimes appear through discovery (Battiste, 2010). Articles by Scheffel and Correia and Messenger and Gallagher are examples of each. They share a purpose, like that shared in Kathy's address, for confronting the narrowed focus on teaching reading as a set of de-contextualized skills in their surrounding school districts. Scheffel and Correia do this by offering an evidence-based contrast of playful, multimodal learning opportunities in a series of summer literacy camps that fostered pleasure in reading. Their case study contributes a new theoretical framework for analyzing joy in literacy learning, and a strong rationale that "restoring joyful literacy learning should not be deemed an aspirational goal but rather an urgent issue." This vital work leads the contributions in this issue, as these authors share conceptual and practical resources for grounding and watering (Muhammad, 2023) our roots in joy-based research and pedagogy.

The research shared by Messenger and Gallagher is an example of how collective resilience can be built through professional learning groups. Their design-based study centred on the contextual needs of Kindergarten educators to situate new requirements for teaching early reading skills within comprehensive and play-based approaches to language learning. An unanticipated, joyful finding emerged as group members experienced growth in their self-efficacy by giving voice to their common struggles and learning to lean on each other for ideas and resources.

Teichert and Chan contribute research focused on a central theme of joy in connecting with community. Specifically, they conducted a narrative inquiry focused on teachers' experiences and preferences with communicating with families. The article considers communication with parents as a literacy that is a social and cultural practice, and found joy was sparked when providing positive communication, developing systems/strategies for continual communication, and in building relationships. The study also recognizes that possibilities for joyful communication may shift and evolve over time.

Turning to pedagogy and reflective practice, Du and Doering's work highlights a teacher learning to enact multiliteracies pedagogy with the scholarly support of a mentor in literacy education. They detail a Learning by Design process (Kalantzis & Cope, 2023) for planning and implementing a unit on multimodal storytelling in a grade eight classroom, offering many examples of joyful learning that celebrated creativity and collaboration while developing skills in making meaning. In the spirit of collaboration, these authors offer practical resources for teachers planning similar learning experiences at the junior-intermediate level.

In "Discovering the learning voice": The power of transmodality in the process of self-authorship, Ott and Robertson, also working as teacher and student, conducted a narrative inquiry about a multimodal assignment in graduate school focussed on life-long learning as meaning making. The findings share examples of life transformation through

transmodal text making, storying a process of how one student came to trust her voice as a learner and educator. Their work situates the purpose of literacy within humanizing approaches to education and theorizes how transmodal meaning making can spark joyful forms of self-discovery.

Heather Phipp's paper, written in the French language, explores the ways her experiences in Europe on sabbatical have contributed to fulfillment and joy in her teaching and life as a teacher educator in French Language Education. Phipps explores themes of walking/connections to place, crossing borders/plurilingualism/stories, and meetings/languages/literatures as she traverses linguistic and geographical landscapes. Through this exploration, Phipps advocates for all academics to experience the value of slowing down, connecting to place, and engaging with diverse perspectives, languages, stories, and literatures.

Also taking up themes of place and well-being, Kulnieks reflects on his personal and pedagogical use of eco-poetic inquiry to embody eco-literacy practices that are joyful because they restore connection with local ecologies. This paper, like Waliszewska's, makes a critical contribution to this special issue by grounding the purpose of language and literacy education in the more-than-human relations that sustain life on Earth.

Finally, Aleks Waliszewska's paper, "Joy amid ruin" answers the call to work for joy as a form of resistance. The author shares her learning through an autobiographical narrative inquiry as she weaves together threads from graduate courses and professional teaching experiences in elementary school. Waliszewska identifies "moments of turning," key points of learning to illuminate her growing understanding of literacies as multimodal, embodied, emergent, place-based, and more-than-human; and considers how these understandings of literacies contribute to joy and open possibilities for teaching and learning in a precarious world.

In and through this special issue, we invite you to think with the theme of joyful possibilities in your own experiences of language and literacies teaching and research. How might the practice of various forms of language and literacy be a joy? What produces joy with/in language and literacies? How might it be generative and lead to other joyful possibilities? We hope the ideas shared by these authors might be a catalyst for seeing, and pursuing, joyful meaning making in your setting.

References

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Author Biographies

Dr. Mary Ott is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Education at York University. Her research in curriculum studies and literacies spans diverse contexts, with a focus on

the design of learning environments that help learners and teachers to thrive and the role of multimodal learning in that process. As a former elementary teacher, Mary is also passionate about mentoring new teachers to develop rich pedagogical practices for teaching language and literacies.

Dr. Lori McKee is an associate professor and graduate chair in the Department of Curriculum Studies, College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan. Her research focuses on literacies, pedagogies, and professional learning and seeks to create openings for expansive literacies learning in schools. Lori's former practice as an elementary school teacher shapes the work she does through research.