

**Laura Bolf Beliveau**

## Renewing Literature Instruction: A Multidimensional Approach

Writing and reading are not all that distinct for a writer. Both exercises require being alert and ready for unaccountable beauty, for the intricateness or simple elegance of the writer's imagination, for the world that imagination evokes. Both require being mindful of the places where imagination sabotages itself, locks its own gates, pollutes its vision. Writing and reading mean being aware of the writer's notions of risk and safety, the serene achievement of, or sweaty fight for, meaning and response-ability.

Toni Morrison,

*Playing in the Dark*, p. xi

### Introduction

Toni Morrison's insightful words not only speak to the intimate connection between reading and writing but also describe the stance from which many read literature. Good readers are often mindful of the intricacies of literature, evoke their imaginations, and eventually come to terms with the demands of reading. Many who aspire to teach English Language Arts (ELA) imagine these types of readers filling their classrooms.

They often dream of the impassioned discussions that will take place. But those of us who have spent time in ELA classrooms know that there are all types of readers in secondary schools, and, more often than not, we remember not the great reader but the marginal one—students who are unwilling or unable to risk reading, who wish to remain in the safe world of disengagement, and who do not care to fight for meaning.

Each summer, when I had time to reflect on the previous year's lessons, I would consider the effectiveness of my literature instruction, often wondering how I could reach Morrison's ideal. In my recent graduate studies, I came into contact with Richard Beach's (1993) *A Teacher's Introduction to Reader Response Theories*, and although I no longer have a high school classroom, the preservice ELA teachers with whom I work have readily agreed that this framework offers a new way to consider how we teach literature. I offer my interpretation here in hopes that others find inspiration from it.

**Tom Meyer**

## On the road to coherence: Story writing, story talk, and making sense

*I have been exposed to my peers' and the professor's very diverse ideas. I have seen [each of us] struggle with articulating thoughts and ideas; at times, I have struggled with applying and making sense of the tremendous amount of material covered. Links are made, however, and "sets of ideas become part of a larger constellation of ideas related to educational theory" (Eisner, 1994, p. 205). My links connect the stars to make a pattern. My affiliation with [my] teacher and peers has helped me make these links. This class, more than any other, has enabled me to view myself as part of this larger intellectual tapestry. (2002, Penny's portfolio; p.2(all names are pseudonyms))*

Many of my students - teacher candidates all - credit their access to the classroom community as having helped them develop understanding, or as Penny puts it, "connect the stars to make a pattern." Connecting stars, making patterns, and naming constellations reflect human efforts to make coherence out of otherwise disparate phenomena. While synthesizing remains a difficult feat, it is a pleasing one nonetheless. Thus, I am wholly committed to supporting teacher candidates' analysis of their past and current experiences as a way to help them articulate and imagine their future teaching philosophies and practice.

Further, in this writing I want to suggest that when teacher candidates write and subsequently re-examine stories about their prior learning, they refine their intentions. The process of re-examining stories is both public and private in my classroom. Perhaps most significantly for this writing, too, the public work is renewing and revitalizing. Certainly, initially, I don't know if my students fully understand or trust that their stories and the writing and sharing of them is substantive and exciting curriculum. For myself, I love the stories and the fresh challenge each one brings. I suspect that as the stories unfurl - get written, shared, and interpreted - many of my students, too, feel a sense of renewal and clarity.

More specifically, for this article, I propose an illustrative case of a teacher candidate, Lou, and the conditions of the instructional context that supported his developing understanding. The story, one of a future earth science teacher, may also demonstrate how story writing processes work across the content areas. In the spirit of Griffin's urging that teacher educators model the practices that they hope teacher candidates will practice in future settings (1999), I try to demonstrate and illustrate my own work in this process.