Rethinking Literacy Teacher Education for the Digital Era: Teacher Educators, Literacy Educators, and Digital Technology Experts Working Together

What does it mean to be literate in the twenty first century? (Alvermann & Hinchman 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Rowsell, 2013). Our understanding of “literacy” is undergoing dramatic changes as an array of communication channels (e.g., text messaging) has extended the boundaries of communication and forms of knowledge construction (Kress, 2010). The fact that literacy now encompasses a broad set of practices, both in and out of school, requires a revision to traditional reading and writing programs (Gee & Hayes, 2011). The increasing complexity of education in our globalized world has implications for teacher educators. The constant change in how we communicate means that we need teacher educators who can incorporate digital technology into their courses and facilitate discussion on being literate in the 21st century. As the field of literacy evolves, educators must rethink what literacy encompasses and revise their courses accordingly. Yet according to Boling (2005), “research has revealed that teacher educators do not always have the knowledge, skills, or dispositions necessary for meaningfully integrating technology into their classes” (p.3). Often use of digital technology is an afterthought, something tacked onto a course (Bullock, 2011).

The impetus for this Connection Grant comes directly from two large-scale SSHRC funded grants. Literacy Teacher Educators: Goals, Vision, and Practices (with Kosnik as PI) has 28 participants from four countries (Canada, US, UK, and Australia). We have collected and analyzed 2/3 of the data; at this point, we can confidently say that some of the challenges facing literacy teacher educators are the changing nature of literacy and inclusion of digital technology into their courses. Teacher Change: Patterns, Factors, and Implications for Professional Education (with Beck as PI) is a longitudinal study over 7-10 years of 45 teachers from two countries. One of the troubling findings has been that some teachers have developed an expansive view of literacy and a repertoire of digitally-rich pedagogies while others have not. We wonder how teacher education courses and in-service education could more fully prepare teachers.

Overall Goals
To address the issues of teacher education and digital technology, this Connection Grant will “connect” scholars and teachers from three disciplines – teacher education, literacy education, and digital technology – and four countries – Canada, US, UK, and Australia in a two-day Symposium (June, 5 and June, 6, 2014). Our collaborations will be framed by the following key questions:

- How is our understanding of literacy evolving in light of the new ways we communicate?
- How can literacy/English teacher educators (LTEs) prepare student teachers to develop and implement literacy programs that capitalize on digital technology (DT)?
- What teacher education curriculum changes are required to better prepare future teachers to integrate DT into their own teaching?
- What professional learning support do LTEs need to develop courses that integrate and make greater use of DT?

Given the complexity of this research, we draw on three relevant bodies of literature: literacy; digital technology; and teacher development. This is in keeping with Gee and Hayes (2011) who argue for a multi-disciplinary approach to research: “Understanding complex systems requires the work of more than a single lone expert. It requires a team of experts” (p. 73). Leu et al. (2009) argue that we must “see the Internet not as a technology but rather as a context in which to read, write, and communicate” (p. 265). Davies and Merchant (2009) re-conceptualize Web 2.0 as a form of communication. In light of the dramatic proliferation of changes to communication patterns, including social media, Cervetti et al. (2008) have issued a call to action: "future teachers should learn about, through, and with technology-based media" (p.383). To respond to Cervetti et al. (2008) our pedagogy of teacher education (Loughran, 2006) must have technology fully integrated into literacy courses - we have to teach with it and help
students acquire the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to incorporate technology into their own teaching (Bullock, 2011; Cervetti, 2008; Kirkwood, 2009; Walsh & Durrant, 2013). As teacher educators struggle to address the increasing complexity of education, many have embarked on initiatives with mixed success (Kirkwood, 2009; Selwyn, 2011; Vasquez et al., 2013). We believe part of the problem in moving forward is that most initiatives focus on a single issue (e.g., digital technology) whereas the complexity of literacy learning necessitates a multi-disciplinary approach. Warschauer (2011) suggests: “Educational reform must address the kinds of skills and practices needed in the world our children will grow up in … and just as with the goal of promoting academic achievement, precision in understanding the nature of this goal and how best to reach it is critical” (p.11). It is this “precision” that we are aiming for in this Connection Grant. Through a collective effort of academics from various disciplines, we will develop a more comprehensive approach to literacy/English courses in teacher education.

Description of Proposed Event

The two-day Symposium (June 5 and 6, 2014) will be held in London, England at Tug Agency which has state of the art equipment for video streaming and recording. (Parts of the Symposium and individual interviews of participants will be videotaped.) The 16 participants who will attend in person and Neil Selwyn who will participate via Skype have been identified as having expertise in at least one discipline: literacy education; teacher education; and/or digital technology. Prior to the meeting, we will begin an on-line discussion to establish rapport among participants and to identify issues facing LTEs. The Symposium organizers will initially pose some questions, but the discussion will evolve as participants exchange their views and raise other relevant questions. We will use our current website www.literacyteaching.net to organize documents and discussion.

The tentative plan for the Symposium is:

**Day 1 Morning** – Introductions, discussion of framing questions, sharing of research. Presentation by Clare Kosnik: *International Study of Literacy Teacher Educators: Lessons Learned*

**Day 1 Afternoon and Evening** – Presentation by Shawn Bullock: *Use of Digital Technology in Teacher Education: Lessons Learned*. Working groups address particular questions, e.g., What challenges do LTEs face? How can DT enhance literacy courses? Discussion will continue over dinner.

**Day 2 Morning** – Presentation by Clive Beck: *Longitudinal Study of Teachers: Lessons Learned*. Working groups address particular questions, e.g., What should be goals for literacy teacher education courses? What are examples of successful integration of DT into literacy/English teacher education courses?

**Day 2 Afternoon and Evening** - Plenary discussion. Develop a draft statement on literacy teacher education which will include: overall goals for courses; specific elements (content and pedagogy) of literacy/English courses using DT; and support required for LTEs. Discussion will continue over dinner.

**Day 3** – Further discussion among co-applicants and some of the out-of-town participants.

**Post Conference**: Our work will continue on-line as we refine our statement on literacy teacher education; provide updates on efforts with colleagues and teaching centres in our respective universities; share presentations done for teachers and policy-makers; jointly plan proposals for conferences; write chapters for the edited book; and explore ways to continue our combined efforts. The website (www.literacyteaching.net) will be continuously updated as materials are developed by the participants. Interviews conducted at the Symposium will be edited and mounted on the website.

We have chosen to host the Symposium in London for a number of reasons: first, our study of literacy teacher educators (Kosnik as PI) has a number of participants from England. From our interviews and data analysis we realize that many have a cutting-edge understanding of literacy, a highly sophisticated approach to using DT in their literacy courses, and a very strong pedagogy. We would like to include most of these participants in this Symposium. Second, Beck, Kosnik, Murray, and White recently presented at the British Educational Research Association and European Educational Research Association conferences and made connections with other UK-based researchers whom we would like to
involves. Third given the time difference between the four countries it would be impossible to hold the event in Toronto and have live video streaming and Skype participation in real time. We would like to have some researchers from Australia participate in specific parts of the program and it would be impossible to do so if we were in Toronto. Some of the Australians who are part of the study of literacy teacher educators will be able participate in person if it is held in the UK.

A description of the research you will be disseminating, transferring, exchanging or mobilizing

All participants will share, prior to the Symposium, at least one paper they have written or project they have conducted, with related documentation. This will provide an opportunity for the participants to explore issues in an interdisciplinary way and broaden their own knowledge by reading outside their discipline or specific area. At the Symposium participants will share additional research in the working groups and after the Symposium collaboration will continue. We will develop the following:

1. We will craft a statement on literacy teacher education that identifies goals and practices for digitally-rich courses in teacher education programs. Written in highly accessible language but rooted in our research it will provide direction for academics, teachers, consultants (who provide in-service), and government policy-makers.
2. Our website www.literacyteaching.net will be expanded to include: video interviews of all the participants about their views and current research; course outlines, academic papers; professional materials; and links to blogs and twitter feeds.
3. We will produce an edited book. The working title is Crossing Boundaries: Literacy/English Teacher Educators Incorporating Digital Technology in Their Courses.
5. We will provide copy for media sources at our home universities (e.g., Varsity newspaper, University of Toronto) and invite them to interview participants about our highly innovative Symposium.
6. We will do presentations at Teaching Centres (university-based), teacher associations (e.g., Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario), and government organizations/meetings (e.g., joint Ontario Ministry of Education and faculties of education conference).

We foresee this Symposium leading to a large-scale SSHRC research proposal (either an Insight Grant or Partnership Grant) that would include researchers from the four countries and three disciplines to systematically study related aspects of literacy education (e.g., influence of personal digital practices on teacher educators; influence of literacy teacher education courses on beginning teachers).

A description of your main audience(s) (e.g., scholars, practitioners, etc.)

Audiences for our work include academics in three disciplines – literacy education, teacher education, and digital technology – and senior administrators in schools of education. Classroom teachers who are on the front-line of education and teacher educators who work with student teachers will find our work relevant because we will bridge theory and practice by providing examples of digitally-rich curricula. We intend to involve classroom teachers in the development of our materials both as co-authors and reviewers. We foresee teachers and teacher educators circulating the materials listed above informally to colleagues and formally at academic and teacher-focused conferences and in professional development sessions they lead. Policy-makers can use our findings to guide instructors on effective use of DT in literacy/English preservice courses.

An explanation as to why it is important to connect with the specified audience(s)

Academic researchers and classroom teachers are often confined to their “silo,” not knowing the language of other disciplines, not accessing research beyond their field, and not building knowledge.
Literacy experts are often specialists in literacy theory and typically teach literacy methods courses in teacher education. Multiliteracies theory, which emerged in the 1990s (New London Group, 1996), maintains that there are many types of literacy: a "burgeoning variety of text forms" (p. 61). The accessibility of various technological tools and shifts in communication practices calls into question traditional conceptions of literacy and how literacy is addressed in schools (Cope & Kalatzis, 2009; Gee & Hayes, 2011; Yelland 2006). New technologies influence the way that we communicate (Davies & Merchant, 2009; Thomas, 2011) and critical literacy theory questions some of the underpinnings of traditional literacy education (Rogers 2013; Vasquez, 2013). Schools need to infuse "information literacy, critical media literacy, and information and communication technology literacy into every
subject taught in our schools. Without these skills and others … our students will not be able to adapt to changes coming their way” (Levin & Schrum, 2012, p. 8). Literacy experts will provide an important perspective for identifying priorities and pedagogies in literacy/English teacher education courses.

**Classroom teachers** are being asked to teach literacy in ways they did not experience as students and most likely did not learn about in their teacher education programs (Darling-Hammond, 2006a, 2006b; Kirkwood, 2009). The complexity of how we communicate means that we need teachers who have a broad definition of literacy, can incorporate DT into their program, and recognize that literacy is evolving (Campano, 2007; Gee & Hayes, 2011; Levin & Schrum, 2012; Lewis, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Luke, 2000; Media Awareness Network, 2010). As Selwyn (2011) notes: “It should be clear to all but the most zealous technophile that the much-heralded technological transformation of schools and schooling has yet to take place” (p. 5). Teachers are essential resources in mapping out next steps.

Williamson (2013) notes “linking teacher education coursework to what teachers actually do in the field is an essential goal, but it is also true that my courses must then keep pace with the rapid changes that are taking place in the field and in society” (p. 13).

Integrating DT into teacher education is a challenge faced by educators throughout the world; if we want solutions we need to be multi-national and multi-disciplinary, because including voices from different countries will ensure that our work is not merely local and that we are drawing on expertise beyond our Canadian border. Of course, our recommendations will have to be modified for other contexts, but teacher educators, teachers, and policy-makers will have a sound basis from which to work. Having representation from four countries, each with different approaches to teacher education, will help us refine our position on sound teacher education pedagogy. Although the four countries face different challenges and have developed their education systems in unique ways, through our collaborative efforts we can learn from each other, craft a research-based statement about effective literacy/English instruction in preservice, and develop materials that have applicability to many different contexts.

By streaming sections of our Symposium to other countries, researchers and practitioners who want to be involved can participate to some degree. By having much of our work available on our website stakeholders can access our materials at their convenience.

**Details on how all activities can be undertaken within one year.**
Proposal approved by SSHRC
Month 1 – Expand website [www.literacyteaching.net](http://www.literacyteaching.net) for on-line discussion. Introduce participants.
Month 1 - 3 – Participants share articles through our on-line discussion system and Skype.
Month 4 – June 5 and 6, 2014 Symposium. June 7 follow-up discussion among co-applicants and some participants.
Month 5 – Submit book proposal to Routledge
Months 5 – 12 – Continued collaborations (e.g., sharing presentations given at conferences and teaching centres); sharing drafts of books chapters
Month 5 – Submit conference proposals (e.g., CSSE; American Educational Research Association)
Months 6 - 8 – Edit and mount interviews on website
Month 12 – Submit manuscript for edited book