

Across the Doorsill: Extending Learning with Students in Mind and Body

Eileen Landay

A program designed to develop literacy in and through the arts creates a "third space" between students' lives in school and their lives outside of school.

Awake

The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.
Don't go back to sleep.
You must ask for what you really want.
Don't go back to sleep.
People are going back and forth across the doorsill
where the two worlds touch.
The door is round and open.
Don't go back to sleep.

—Rumi

The fall term started at Central High School in St. Paul, Minnesota, two days after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans on August 29, 2005. When students arrived in Jan Mandell's advanced theater class, a discussion began about what was happening several thousand miles to the south. A big storm. Flooding. People on rooftops and crowded into a big building. It was all over the TV. Actually, students conceded, they didn't really know much.

Mandell herself wanted to know more. She wanted her students to know more and believed that, together, the class could come to understand many aspects of the disaster and perhaps even find ways to help. In Mandell's classes, students do much more than put on plays; they *create, refine, and perform* original plays based on topics and themes she and the class identify as

being important to them as individuals and, also, to the larger society. After some discussion, the class decided it would create a theater piece about New Orleans and Katrina.

In a recent conversation, Mandell explained: "I asked them, 'Do you want to go any deeper with this? Find a newspaper article or television report about Katrina that you can connect with personally. Where can you find yourself out there?' They brought in a variety of things. Some people watched TV and wrote about it. Others came in with pictures and articles from the newspaper."

In this way, the class set about learning about Hurricane Katrina. They shared the information they had. Next, they talked about what they would need to know in order to create an accurate and interesting performance. They brainstormed a list and gave themselves

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assignments: to watch, listen, and read the news to get a full and accurate picture of what was happening; to learn about the geography, history, and customs of New Orleans; to understand as much as they could about the hurricane; and to gather stories of people affected by the storm.

They did all these things and more. Some collected clothing and worked as volunteers at the local Martin Luther King Center, sorting and packing donated clothing bound for Louisiana. By chance, there they met a family who had survived the hurricane and come north to establish residence in St. Paul. Through ongoing interviews, this couple gave the students a personal account of exactly what they had experienced. Other students located local people with firsthand knowledge of life and customs in New Orleans – the school's principal among them – and invited them to come to class. Over the next

few weeks, the students listened, viewed, read, researched, discussed, debated, improvised, and wrote vignettes and narratives describing what they had learned. With the help of their teacher and volunteer actors and directors, they wove their work into a performance they titled simply *Katrina*.

The performance included monologues and group performance pieces written by the students and incorporating dance, music, and spoken word. Cumulatively, the piece offered powerful images of the hurricane's effect on the city's residents and included references to Louisiana's political and social history.

One month later, in the school's "black box" theater, the class performed their work for an audience of family, teachers, and friends, including, as guests of honor, the family who had fled the hurricane and who had been an important source of background information. Following the performance, as is customary, the performers participated in a "talk back" in which they answered questions and responded to comments from the audience.

That evening's performance of *Katrina* was only the first of many. During the next four weeks, the play was presented during the day for students and faculty at Central High School. Later, a subset of the class, called the Central Touring Company, took the performance into the community at large, performing *Katrina* a dozen times at schools, community centers, and local universities.

Over the past twenty-nine years, Mandell and her students have developed and performed plays that touch on social issues as varied as access to education, racial harmony, family structures, and poverty. The effect of Mandell's work has been widely felt in her school, in the school district, and

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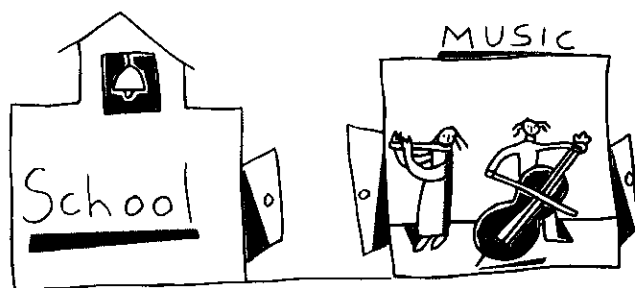
throughout the Minneapolis–St. Paul community. Their play on child abuse, performed for the Minnesota House of Representatives, influenced legislation on the topic. Her students have served as mentors to less-experienced peers and to younger students in schools; they have provided professional development and support for other teachers in the district and in the community.

Graduates of her program have become actors, writers, teachers, youth workers, and social activists. Many have remained in the Minneapolis–St. Paul area, and a number of these former students return regularly to work with her and her Central High School students. In 2003, Mandell and a colleague, Jennifer Wolf, published *Acting, Learning, and Change*, describing Mandell's instructional approach in detail.

Mandell's work has now been taken up by teachers across the curriculum in area schools, as well as teachers and performers in local after-school programs.

Performances as Opportunities for Learning

Projects of this sort serve as powerful means of extending learning, both for those enrolled in the class and, subsequently, for others, in a widening circle of influence. Students in classes such as Mandell's benefit cognitively – as well as in attitude and behavior – from the experience of planning, assuming genuinely meaningful roles in organizing and carrying out the work, observing and focusing on details, and engaging in sustained practice and deliberation (Heath 2000, 2001). They become repositories of expert knowledge and, in sharing that knowledge with others through performance, act as reservoirs



of learning, transmitters of information, and models to peers and others in the wider community.

In preparing and presenting their work, students employ a wide range of artistic forms using language and other media and modalities. Modes of presentation include photography and other visual arts, music, dance, and a wide range of spoken-word genres. Processes involved in information gathering, data collection, and preparation of presentations include interviewing, reading, writing, researching, discussing, summarizing, composing, and revising. James Catterall (2005) describes these processes using the terms *conversations* and *silences*. *Conversations* include the full, rich, inner, and interpersonal dialogues of creation and expression. *Silences* describe subconscious brain functions and cognitive restructuring produced by immersion in – and production of – works of art.

Extending Learning: Creating a Third Space

Experiences such as those of Mandell's students extend well beyond the content and approaches customarily observed in public school classrooms. The metaphor *third space* provides a useful means of describing the original and vibrant environment created by the juxtaposition of students' lived worlds with knowledge drawn from formal learning settings.¹

The *Katrina* project and its extension beyond the classroom into the community illustrate how third spaces do the work of extending learning. They do so by:

- linking participants' interests, experiences, and knowledge to those valued and formally presented in school settings;
- incorporating performance-based media such as music, theater, and visual arts into the work of academic disciplines;
- connecting classroom learning with concrete, specific, and practical goals and activities in the wider world.

Rumi's poem quoted in the opening of this article urges people to step across the doorsill where two worlds touch. The poem suggests the possibility of entry into a *third space*. What guidance exists for the process of designing spaces of this sort that can be deliberately brought to life and enacted in both in-school and after-school settings?

¹ See, for example Stevenson and Deasy (2005) for examples of school settings they identify as third spaces by virtue of their arts-related focus. Among others who have employed the metaphor for similar, but not identical, purposes are Gutierrez et al. 1999 and Moje et al. 2004.

The juxtaposition of students' lived worlds with knowledge drawn from formal learning settings creates a *third space*.

A Framework for Creating a Third Space: The ArtsLiteracy Project

For the past five years, Mandell and colleagues in Minneapolis–St. Paul have developed a partnership with the ArtsLiteracy Project at Brown University. An initiative that focuses on developing literacy in and through the arts, ArtsLiteracy provides curriculum development and professional development for teachers and artists across the country and abroad that is applicable to both in-school and after-school programs. Founded ten years ago in Brown's education department, ArtsLiteracy introduces participants to a set of principles and a flexible instructional framework that outlines a process, or "roadmap," and establishes a common vocabulary for creating third spaces that combine participants' knowledge and interests with the content of academic disciplines as a way of addressing significant questions and social issues. The staff hold courses, conferences, professional development workshops, and seminars

for teachers, artists, community activists, youth, and others at Brown, at partner sites such as the St. Paul schools and in a variety of other school and university settings. They develop, document, and disseminate curriculum within and across settings in face-to-face meetings and online.²

ArtsLiteracy’s focus is not on producing a standardized off-the-shelf literacy or arts curriculum, nor offering a set of methods. Instead, it draws on a full repertoire of art-making and literacy-development tools and identifies a process that supports participants’ learning and development (Landay 2004). Literacy practices are embedded in community-oriented, performance-based work.

The instructional framework described in this section and depicted in Figure 1 – *the performance cycle* – is not intended to be a template for “systematic instruction” but, rather, a guide for shaping teaching and learning experiences. Drawing on and incorporating the diverse talents of individual participants, it is adapted to the context in which it is being used, while providing a common vocabulary for designing and discussing teaching and learning. While the example and discussion offered here center on literacy and the arts, the performance cycle can be adapted to curriculum in any content area designed to be student centered and project based.

Building Community

By focusing on building community as a first step to literacy instruction and by returning regularly and often to that aspect of the cycle, participants acknowledge what is widely understood but

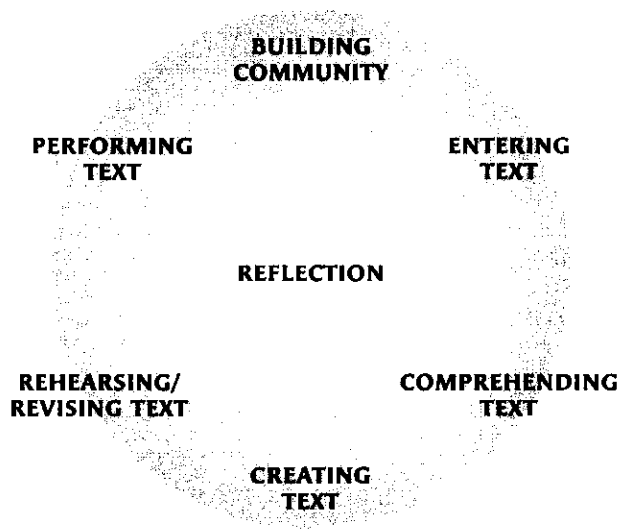


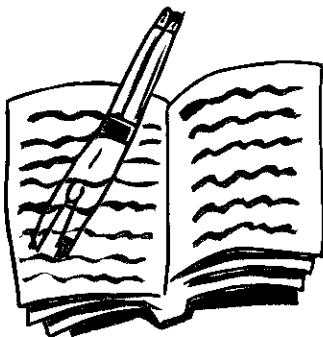
Figure 1
The performance cycle (developed by Eileen Landay and Kurt Wootton)

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² For more information, see the ArtsLiteracy Web site at <www.artslit.org>.

At its most effective, a learning community is one whose members have a shared purpose; supportive relationships among people of varying levels of expertise; and a repertoire of routines and activities.

seldom acted upon in educational settings: the fundamental connection between social relations and learning. Building a community of practice “does not necessarily refer to a sense of harmony, but rather a shared set of social practices and goals” (Lee & Smagorinsky 2000, p. 5). At its most effective, a learning community is one whose members have a shared purpose; supportive relationships among people of varying levels of expertise; and a repertoire of routines and activities to which everyone contributes and within which everyone grows (Wenger 1998). Well-structured and well-implemented performance work creates effective classroom communities that, in turn, act as a scaffold that supports the development of literacy skills.



Entering Text

The focus in this step is on introducing a topic or raising a question that students will find compelling and feel they can contribute to. Activities create “a reason to read and write” (Landay 2001, 2005), especially for those students who have not yet had extensive positive interactions with text. Participants use a range of tools including improvisation, discussion, and image making in preparation for exploring relevant texts and addressing the question at hand.

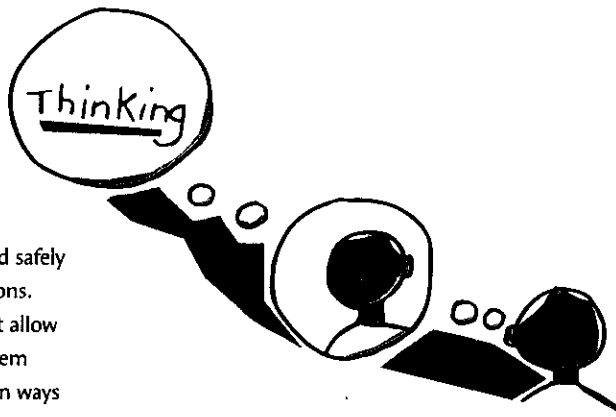
Comprehending Text

Students undertake in-depth encounters with text in order to address questions and concerns that are the focus of their work. Students may read difficult and challenging texts in order to draw on wisdom and beauty produced by minds they may not be able to encounter in person. Taxonomies for comprehending texts may range from the simplest – What does it say? What does it mean? Why does it matter? (Blau 2003) – to the more comprehensive and complex. In an updating of Bloom’s classic taxonomy, for example, Lorin Anderson and colleagues (2001) identify both *comprehension* processes, ranging from remembering to creating, and *types of knowledge to be comprehended*, including factual, conceptual, procedural, and metacognitive.

Creating Text

Participants generate, plan, and produce an original script that addresses core questions and incorporates texts they have read and written. By so doing, they

generate a trace in a format that opens up a range of new possibilities. [It then becomes possible to] inspect and reinspect the same ideas, coming at them from many different angles and in many different frames of mind. We can hold the original ideas steady



so that we may judge them, and safely experiment with subtle alterations. We can store them in ways that allow us to compare and combine them with other complexes of ideas in ways that would quickly defeat the unaugmented imagination. In these ways... physical text transforms the space of possible thoughts. (Clark 1998, p. 208)

The texts students create represent responses to questions raised and issues identified in prior discussions, as well as in their own and other people's texts.

Rehearsing/Revising Text

Rehearsal involves demonstration, discussion, justification, explanation, and modification. Students address and improve the quality of the work. They develop partial solutions and conjectures that are "passed around, amended, completed by others" (Clark 1998, p. 206), resulting in a "process of externally encoded cognitive change and discovery" (Donald 1991, p. 343). In the rehearsal/revision process, participants engage in purposeful repetition and make their thinking visible and explicit.

Performing Text

All work results in a performance, though the forms, purposes, and audiences may vary widely. Sometimes, performances are brief and informal,

intended for a small audience of peers; sometimes performances are formal and intended for a large, public audience. The performance crystallizes the experience and provides a shared sense of common purpose. Often, after a group has gone full circle from initial community building to final performance, students will say that for the first time they truly have begun to experience a sense of community.

Reflection

Reflection takes place regularly in every step of the performance cycle. Clark (1998) points to "thinking about thinking" as a good candidate for a distinctively human capacity, one not evidently shared by the non-language-using animals that share our planet and that may be characteristic of the cognitive landscape of *Homo sapiens*. This "cluster of powerful capacities involv[es] self-evaluation, self-criticism, and finely honed remedial responses" (Clark 1998, p. 209). Reflection provides the opportunity for participants to step

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back from experience, consider its significance, and reshape both their internal inclinations and capacities and external behaviors.

Crossing the Doorsill: Entering a Third Space

If, as the examples and research cited here claim, creating and maintaining third spaces is an effective means of anchoring and furthering student learning, how do the educators who hold primary responsibility for designing and implementing the formal academic environment of schools contribute to such an effort? While it may appear to make sense from an organizational perspective for school administrators to narrow their focus – to “wall off” their organization and its work from the larger world by establishing and measuring goals and procedures specific only to their enterprise – such an approach best serves students who have already aligned their interests and efforts with that of the organization. It can be positively detrimental to those students whose *funds of knowledge* (Moll, Tapia & Whitmore 1993) and discourses reflect different backgrounds, interests, and experience.



“Walling off” schools from the larger world can be positively detrimental to those students whose *funds of knowledge* reflect different backgrounds.

In a recent talk to educators, Harvard Project Zero director Steve Seidel (2007) asked the audience to be mindful of the distinction between quality learning experiences and what he called “proxies,” a term I understood to mean activities that *stand in for learning*, in which students go through the motions of learning without being truly engaged. In Seidel’s words, “For young people, none of the proxies matter very much. I believe they say to themselves, ‘If the quality of the experience is not compelling, what am I doing this for?’”

The distinction between engaged learning and its many proxies is useful for educators committed to creating environments in which students truly have high-quality learning experiences. To create such an environment, they must develop and maintain a clear picture of the context within which students live and work; understand their students “in the process of defining themselves” in school and out (Greene 1995, p. 13); understand the expectations and demands of the system; and contribute to the creation of third spaces that serve the needs of students and society.

By acknowledging the value and richness of varied contexts for learning and the importance of real-world outcomes, by introducing and supporting flexible processes such as the performance cycle and building on models such as Jan Mandell's in St. Paul, administrators are bound to extend the potential for success in learning to all students and help to open wide the door that allows them to step across the doorsill into a vibrant and lively third space.

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