

Organically Grown:

Development of the Georgia State University Urban Literacy Clinic

BY
LORI ELLIOTT
AND NANCY
LEE DAILY



As an hour and a half of literacy instruction, skills demonstrations, and discussion of course content concludes, someone calls out: "Here they come!" – and the energy in the auditorium-style clinic space skyrockets, fueled by movement, smiles, laughter, and most of all, by the electrifying eye contact between students and tutors. For the next hour and fifteen minutes, individualized tutoring sessions are taught while master-level teachers observe lessons and offer feedback to the new teachers. Doctoral students lead parents in workshops focused on family literacy practices, and the university faculty instructor monitors progress and videotapes literacy session segments for future instruction.

This is a typical evening at one of many literacy sessions at the Georgia State University Urban Literacy Clinic (ULC). It is amazing that the scene depicted above illustrates a university literacy clinic that has been in existence for only two years. New parents frequently ask, "How long have you been here? Why didn't I know about you before now?" The answer is that we have only been in formal operation for two years, but the real beginning was almost 10 years earlier, inspired by a common sense idea best expressed by Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett (2007):

[R]esearch universities...must function as moral/intellectual institutions simultaneously engaged in advancing universal knowledge, learning, and improving the well-being of their local geographic communities;...not only in but for their local communities" (p. 79).

In the mid-1990s, the essence of the discussions swirling around teacher preparation was how to close two gaping chasms in education: 1) the perceived distance between "Ivory Tower" pedagogy instruction by university faculty and the "Real World" teaching situations of public school teachers, and 2) "closing the achievement gap" between white students and minority students (Education Trust, 2006). These social conversations seemed to have increased in volume at precisely the same time that the Middle-Secondary Education and Instructional Technology Department (MSIT) at GSU began a redesign of its undergraduate middle grades teacher preparation program and Lori arrived as a new doctoral student. The guiding idea was that preservice teachers should be working in schools "from the start," seamlessly blending theory and practice throughout the program.

This idea was the conceptual "seed" from which the ULC first began to grow.

School Partnerships – Grades 4-8

Lori was eager to participate as a teaching assistant in this newly designed program because, having just completed her ninth year as a public school special education teacher, reading Goodlad (1984) and Dewey (1916) was inspirational. Here was an opportunity to see the concept of experiential learning in action, situated in a university-school partnership. The middle grades program included a block of two literacy courses – one in content area reading and one in literacy assessment. Dialogue with administrators and faculty members at a nearby middle school established a mutual teaching-learning partnership in which the undergraduate literacy block classes met at the middle school two days each week for instruction from 1998-2001, followed by reading and writing tutoring in literacy sessions under direct supervision. This literacy block, taken during their first semester, offered the preservice teachers a first opportunity to work with children, while at the same time absorbing the "pulse and rhythm" (Paley, 1979) of an inner-city school. As Lori grew from teaching assistant to course instructor there, the partnership deepened and the ideal of "education as a form of intervention in the world" (Freire, 1998, p. viii) and the goal of transformative learning (Mazirow, 2000) increasingly became realities.

In 2001, the need to provide experience with fourth and fifth grade students required that the partnership be transplanted to an elementary school, where it continued to be nurtured through the summer of 2004 by a new cohort of 25 preservice teachers each

semester, the school's principal, and its teachers. During that final summer, students in a new middle grades Master of Arts in Teaching program joined this partnership, bringing new growth into the process and working with the fourth and fifth grade summer school students as part of the Content Area Reading course required during the first term in that program. For almost all of them, this was their first opportunity to interact with children that age in an academic endeavor.

Adding a Master's Degree Field Experience – TIP & The Study Hall

In 2003, when a juvenile probation officer approached the MSIT department seeking help, the faculty decided to add a field experience to the M.Ed. in Reading program and an offshoot partnership was established with the non-profit Truancy Prevention Project (TIP) associated with the local juvenile court. That connection branched again in 2005 into a new association with The Study Hall, a non-profit after-school program serving several children from the elementary school and TIP partners. The Study Hall, like our partner schools and the Truancy Intervention Program, is located in an impoverished area near the university.

Through TIP and The Study Hall, certified teachers studying to become master-level teachers have extended theory-into-practice learning experiences into classes in the courthouse with teenagers identified by the court as at risk of dropping out and with third through eighth grade youths at The Study Hall. These "beyond school" experiences opened the teachers' eyes to the web of people and organizations joining schools in working for children and families in the community.

In 2006, when the Special Education Department added a Reading Endorsement to their M.Ed. program to meet the "highly qualified" requirements of No Child Left Behind, more classes were added, and those students joined the reading majors at The Study Hall. Classes met in a small trailer attached to the main building, added more children to the literacy sessions, and closed with a group reflection on that session's experiences.

Another new element added in 2006 was the integration of the reading majors' culminating practicum course as an overlay to the M.Ed. course in The Study Hall, allowing them to develop clinical practice in preparation for their future work as school reading specialists and literacy coaches. Reading majors were now able to apply their skills in professional

development, teacher and student observation, in-depth assessment, and reflection and feedback as they worked with the tutoring pairs each week. Children learned from teachers who were learning to teach reading, those teachers learned from the literacy coaches in the practicum course as well as from the children, and the coaches learned from both teachers and students how to implement their own new knowledge and skills. Learners at all three levels grew in knowledge, skills, and confidence in an increasingly powerful teaching-learning circle.

Opening The Urban Literacy Clinic On Campus

Field-based reading courses are, of course, not new. Reading clinics are not new. Reading clinics have a long history, primarily serving as a place for reading-specialists-in-training to apply their developing diagnostic skills (Morris, 1999). They have typically served the very specific goal of providing an evaluation by a reading teacher-in-training, followed by specific skill lessons for a designated number of weeks. Given the vast research advancements in the field of reading, including a broader definition of literacy and the multi-dimensional tasks required of literacy professionals in schools today, the purpose of literacy clinics is evolving to include much more than one specific purpose (Evensen & Mosenthal 1999).

It had long been a goal of literacy faculty and college of education administrators at GSU to sponsor an on-campus literacy clinic. The growing collaborations with local schools and community organizations within the neighborhoods surrounding the university built a foundation for the ULC to become a reality in 2006 and opened possibilities to move the traditional reading clinic concept to a new level. The multi-dimensional perspective "organically grown" in the community, continues to be the focus of the ULC. It both draws upon and expands the rich history of reading clinics (Kibby & Barr, 1999) in pursuing two main goals--to provide a place for literacy leaders at all levels of preparation to practice their craft (Morris, 2003), while simultaneously providing important literacy services to children and families in the community.

Courses in the ULC focus on preparing literacy leaders who are adept at many different tasks and who will work under a wide array of titles, such as reading specialist, literacy coach, curriculum coach, Title I reading teacher, ESL teacher, special education teacher, content-area teacher, special education teacher, literacy researcher, and university literacy teacher educator. From all of its continuing collaborations in the community, the ULC has grown into an

organization able to provide opportunities for literacy educators at every level to *learn-practice-educate* simultaneously.

In the two years since its opening, over 300 children and their families have participated in the literacy sessions in the ULC and 289 master-level teachers across five different programs have applied their new skills, while doctoral researchers help to gather and analyze data. Our collaborative work with community organizations continues to find creative ways to provide services, and everyone is working together to 'close the gap'.

Continuing Growth

Since 2006, our message has spread. We now also collaborate with the After-School All Stars non-profit program during the summer semester to provide an opportunity for pre-service teachers in our English and Middle Grades M.A.T. programs to develop strong content-area literacy knowledge. These associations allow us to work with over 200 students in four local middle schools during the summers. Additionally, we have established a connection with the Metro Atlanta Boys and Girls Club as an opportunity for pre-service teachers in the Early Childhood Education department to learn more about supporting the literacy development of young children. The most recent foray has been into an early childhood ESOL class working with children and families for whom English is not their first language. Additionally, conversations have begun with faculty members in the Counseling and Special Education department who prepare school psychologists to administer initial, reading-screening assessments for children.

Each semester brings new possibilities. Each new expansion adds a new opportunity for collaboration to deepen our understanding and broaden our perspectives about literacy learning. The ULC is the hub of the literacy program, with students ranging from children to Ph.D. level involved in some manner, demonstrating that universities have an important role in community development, innovation, and research. It has quietly grown into a place within *and* for the community that brings together an ever-widening circle of like-minded people to serve children. Its organic and flexible framework is its strength.

References

- Benson, L., Harkavy, I., & Puckett, J. (2007). *Dewey's dream: Universities and democracies in an age of education reform*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York: MacMillan. Education Trust (2006). Retrieved January 16, 2009, from <http://www2.edtrust.org/edtrust/summaries 2006/Georgia.pdf>
- Evensen, D. H., & Mosenthal, P. B. (1999). Reconsidering the role of the reading clinic in a new age of literacy. In Peter B. Mosenthal (Series Ed.) & D. H. Evensen & P. B. Mosenthal (Vol. Eds.), *Reconsidering the reading clinic in a new age of literacy*, (pp. 3-40). Stamford, CT: Jai Press.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civic courage*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Goodlad, J. (1983). *A place called school*. New York: McGraw Hill. Kibby, M. W., & Barr, R. (1999). The education of reading clinicians. In P. B. Mosenthal (Series Ed.) & D. H. Evensen & P. B. Mosenthal (Vol. Eds.), *Reconsidering the reading clinic in a new age of literacy*, (pp. 3-40). Stamford, CT: Jai Press.
- Mazirow, J., & Associates (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Morris, D. (1999). The role of clinical training in the teaching of reading. In P. B. Mosenthal (Series Ed.) & D. H. Evensen & P. B. Mosenthal (Vol. Eds.), *Reconsidering the reading clinic in a new age of literacy*, (pp. 69-100). Stanford, CT: Jai Press.
- Morris, D. (2003). Of Studebakers and Reading Clinicians. Retrieved April 11, 2008, from http://www.americanreadingforum.org/Yearbooks/03_yearbook /pdf/Morris.pdf
- Paley, V. (1979). *White teacher*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

**IRA REGIONAL
CONFERENCES**

33rd Southwest
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
February 3-10, 2010

20th West
Portland, Oregon
February 17 - 20, 2010

