Supporting Literacy Leaders in Sustaining Change in Rural Spaces: Recommendations for Three Shifts

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**English Language Arts** (ELA) teachers have had a long history of adapting their curriculum to incorporate technology (McCorkle & Palmeri, 2016). However, ELA is in a particularly exciting era of restructuring and redefinition. Scholars and practitioners alike are asking questions like: Why English and not Englishes? Why language and not languages (including nonlinguistic languages) and literacies that are social and multimodal? And even Why arts? Why not sciences, histories, technologies, or other subjects or interdisciplinary work that isn’t subject specific? (Cushman, Juzwick, McKenzie, & Smith, 2016). These conversations in the field are not merely about terms. They embody real concerns about the role of institutions and the leaders therein. In a climate of such ideological overhaul, it can be unclear where those individuals formerly known as ELA teachers locate themselves and how they use those locations to develop curriculum.

In any teaching context, ELA teachers working to promote literacies through engagement with modern internet technologies are at the forefront of the movement to change thinking about English as a subject matter. However, rural ELA teachers seem to face particular challenges. Among these challenges are an underdeveloped infrastructure for supporting technologies (Strauss, Rupp, & Love, 2016), resistance from the community to use technologies because of cost, mistrust, or other reasons (Hamby, Taylor, Smith, Mitchell, & Jones, 2018), and the general difficulties in recruiting and retaining teachers in rural areas (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). Thus, rural literacy leaders are constantly working to support a small pool of mostly newly hired teachers to use technologies. These teachers may not have steady access to technologies or skills to constructively disrupt community preferences and norms.

As rural teachers strive to make these often slow but steady changes in curriculum that use technology in more meaningful ways, strong leadership is needed to support their efforts because rural educators are a much more visible part of the community than in suburban and urban spaces, and, often, they are among the most formally educated in terms of having a degree (Flora, 2018). Finally, rural districts have a smaller tax base than their urban and suburban counterparts and far fewer revenues come from business. Thus, individual families pay for education in rural areas and not corporate entities (Ferguson, 1991).

In this article, I share some observations from my research about leadership support for bringing together technologies and literacies in rural secondary settings. I have been working with rural ELA teachers in many states in the west and Midwest for about four years. I have been excited and intrigued by the leadership support these teachers are providing and receiving as well as their descriptions of what literacy leaders at all levels might do to sustain change. Specifically, I found that teachers benefitted when specific shifts in perspectives were being made by teachers and leaders in tandem.

**Shift 1:** “Why aren’t you helping students demonstrate technological literacies?” becomes “How can we help students demonstrate literacies with technologies?”

**Shift 2:** “Why don’t you want to use this technology?” becomes “What technologies do you want to use?”

**Shift 3:** “How will this look to the community?” becomes “How can we engage the community?”

These shifts had the potential to increase the sustainability of initiatives around technology and literacies in the schools where these teachers work. It also increased their willingness to serve in leadership capacities and supported their general feeling of commitment to their schools, their students, and the rural settings where they worked. By describing these shifts, I hope to share information that will support other rural ELA and literacy leaders build stronger communities of teachers.

**Shift 1**
The history of literacies and technologies is dominated by an emphasis on computer literacies as basic skills (Bawden, 2001). These skills include keyboarding, sending an email attachment, and communication skills that revolve around formal grammar and document formatting. In rural settings, adults do not always feel like they have mastered the technical skills of using a computer or internet-capable device because of their previous school experiences in communities with low quality infrastructure and because the employment options available to them have not always required these skills (Allen, 1994). Therefore, when technological literacies emerge in educational conservations, these lower-tier skills might seem like the next logical step.
Modern notions of literacy are less concerned about basic computer functions and more concerned about deep engagement with a variety of complex tasks.

Focusing on so-called basic technology skills prevents many conversations about more modern notions of technological literacies. Instead of skills, we focus on helping students navigate the “implosion of knowledge” (Luke, 2018), foreseen in the 1990s, that has impacted social and political life (New London Group, 1996). Having access to such an enormous quantity of information can be unsettling. How does one decide what is truth and what is error? Can such a determination be made reliably? Moreover, engaging with digital literacies causes questions to arise regarding identity negotiation and understandings about power structures such as: Where am I as a sociopolitical being? How do I contribute to challenges in the community? How could I help? Compounding these challenges is the fact that such questions do not have ready answers.

So, to those who are not used to new and emerging notions of literacies, it might not seem like students could learn anything productive. The teacher has to provide opportunities for students to have guided experiences that they understand as contributing to something meaningful. For example, one teacher in my research, John, wanted to help his students became better writers and he determined that using mentor texts might provide such an opportunity (Culham, 2016). However, he also needed to respond to concerns in the community about what texts were relevant and appropriate. He began this work by pulling generic mentor texts from traditional print sources, but a wise literacy leader intervened and suggested using web-based resources, but not just to be modern. She wanted John to use the wide array of resources to find texts that were more relevant to students. With her help, John identified several texts that focus on various aspects of rural life, including farm collectivization, food sustainability, and immigrant labor issues. Students then chose from these topics and began using these texts as mentors for their own writing on topics they chose.

As students engaged with these ideas, they inevitably needed and desired to draw on other sources. John decided to mentor the students through information finding and vetting together in several rounds to gain confidence. When the students were finished with their projects, his literacy leader invited him to share his work with his professional learning team and also to display their work on a night when parents would visit the building. John’s literacy leader took his interest in mentor texts and used it to push him to topics that the community would regard as important and then helped him think of ways to use internet resources and community publicity to increase engagement.

**Shift 2**

Historically, schools have been some of the last entities to be offered new and emerging technologies (Cuban, Kirkpatrick, & Peck, 2001). Typically, business and industry, even private homes, are first. However, when technologies do make their way into schools, schools fill with equipment their students and teachers do not use. In my work, I’ve found old radios, video and audio recording systems, projectors, and more. I went to one school that had a cart of laptops that were more than fifteen years old! Unfortunately, not only are these items not being used now, there is an entire line of research documenting how most were rarely or never used (Collins & Halverson, 2018). Further, when they were used, it was usually for entertainment or to satisfy an administrator who purchased them and demanded their use, rather than for meaningful digital literacy learning (Cuban, et. al., 2001).

Wise literacy leaders are learning to ask teachers what they want instead of buying technologies and then mandating their use. For example, Michelle taught in a school with a bring your own device (BYOD) policy in a rural school about an hour away from a major
Out of this duality that does not seem to serve anyone well comes they are both inside and outside of the classroom (Valdés, 2017). Examples of educators denying children the opportunity to be who and to community needs and desires. Educational history is rife with personhood and defend a pedagogical practice. and administrators to navigate spaces where they have to step into known figure. Teachers are supposed to represent the will and even now, teaching in a rural school makes someone a highly visible well-known figure. Teachers are supposed to represent the will and even the morals of the community. It can be difficult for both teachers and administrators to navigate spaces where they have to step into personhood and defend a pedagogical practice.

On the flip side, educators have not always been sensitive to community needs and desires. Educational history is rife with examples of educators denying children the opportunity to be who they are both inside and outside of the classroom (Valdés, 2017). Out of this duality that does not seem to serve anyone well comes build curriculum where students could engage with digital literacies that could be accessed via cell phone and that did not require all students to have a device. When her literacy leader visited her classroom and observed, Michelle advocated. She said that she was doing her best and so were the students, but surely the BYOD policy was not bearing all the fruit it could in supporting digital literacies.

Although funding resources were scarce and a one-to-one device purchase was not on an option, the literacy leader asked Michelle what device would be helpful. Michelle did some research and some thinking about her curriculum and asked for a set of tablets that students could use when they did not have a device and to supplement the cell phone use. In this case, the literacy leader could have just bought what she thought Michelle needed or given her an explanation about how scarce money was or how the school did not have the wireless fidelity bandwidth to support devices that did not have their cellular connection. Instead, she asked what Michelle needed and then found a way to help.

Shift 3
All the way back in the 1930s, sociologist Willard Waller was studying what teaching does to teachers. He explained that teachers are often positioned as nonpersons, essentially subject to community judgment to such an extent that teachers are afraid to be people—with likes/dislikes, political views, illnesses, and any other distinctive features of mind and body (1932). When Waller was researching, most of the schools he was working in were rural. Even now, teaching in a rural school makes someone a highly visible well-known figure. Teachers are supposed to represent the will and even the morals of the community. It can be difficult for both teachers and administrators to navigate spaces where they have to step into personhood and defend a pedagogical practice.

On the flip side, educators have not always been sensitive to community needs and desires. Educational history is rife with examples of educators denying children the opportunity to be who they are both inside and outside of the classroom (Valdés, 2017). Out of this duality that does not seem to serve anyone well comes new notions of community engagement. This can take on forms such as locating funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2006), as well as more general notions of community engagement and information sharing.

In my research, I saw many examples of this. Karen, a teacher in a rural-remote area, had tablet devices for each of her students. Faculty concerns were raised about whether sending the tablets home with assignments would be received well by parents who had indicated concerns about screen time for their children. In response, the teachers and administrators adopted a policy of sharing learning goals on the learning management system via an onscreen banner so that parents would know instantly whether their children were working on a school assignment or something else. The school also provided information to parents about screen time for different ages and examples of online tasks that would bring benefits to students versus device use that was merely for entertainment.

Finally, almost all of the teachers with whom I researched had stories of parent complaints about technology use. Calvin shared a story wherein a parent vehemently objected to having their child report findings from an assignment on social media.

In her objection, she wrote a passionate indictment of social media as being responsible for the spread of gossip, lies, and immoral content. What was Calvin to do? After all, on some level, he agreed with her.

He and his principal brainstormed several options. First, he could insist on the social media piece, award no points for alternatives, and discount the parent’s concern. Second, he could make an accommodation and allow the student to use a traditional pencil-paper response. Third, he could articulate his reasoning for using social media, despite its drawbacks, and see what the mother said. He chose the third option—dialogue. He started by agreeing with her and thanking her in order to acknowledge her personhood. He then asserted his. He wrote about why he wanted a social media response—so the students could read and respond to each other asynchronously—and he discussed his goal of modeling appropriate and intelligent social media use in the hopes that students would become more savvy than the celebrities and pundits that give social media a bad name. He ended the letter saying that if she still did not feel comfortable,
her child would not be required to use social media. The mother expressed ongoing hesitancy, but she gave permission for her child to post. In another school, the principal could have taken the safer path of offering the alternative assignment and cancelling the teacher’s plans for social media use in the future. Instead, he defended literacy, supported the teacher, and led in ways that have more potential to build the community.

**Final Thoughts**

I have presented three mindset shifts that I found supported rural teachers as they incorporated internet-connected devices and other technologies into their teaching practices. The bottom line is that using these new technologies to build capacity for increasingly sophisticated literacies requires leaders that are not just committed to spending money on devices and time on professional development. Instead, sustaining changes in curriculum and instruction unfold as leaders make efforts to advocate for overall technological infrastructure as well as a human infrastructure where teachers can become excited about what they are doing and integrate new ideas into their long-term plans for their students’ learning as well as their own.

Further, while overarching policy decisions are critical to ensuring access to new and emerging literacies and technologies, it is often the seemingly small decisions about how to apply policies that really distinguish literacy leaders who can sustain change from those who will struggle to do so. From the stories of these shifts, we also see that sustaining change as literacy leaders requires an ongoing effort to build knowledge and understanding about literacy and technology, but that is not enough. It is also important to engage in leadership practices that support and defend teachers as well as ensure that children and families are served. Bringing together sound understandings about leadership with sound understandings about literacies and technologies is the most likely to lead to successful outcomes. In addition, leaders are positioned to see themselves in the new thinking about literacies and how that fits into conversations about what is distinguishing about literacies as well as English, language, and arts.

Finally, while much of what has been said can adapt to other contexts, literacy leaders in rural areas must be acknowledged for the ways in which their situations are unique. When they go to the grocery store, people know them. When they begin a literacy initiative, people will know that, too, and those leaders have to account for it face-to-face. By making these three suggested shifts, rural literacy leaders can have the kind of community support that builds them up as people and strengthen their resolve to sustain positive change.

**References**


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