

The background features a dark, textured surface with a grid of rectangular panels. The right side is dominated by a bright, glowing red and orange light source, creating a lens flare effect. The overall aesthetic is modern and artistic.

***Creating  
Literacy  
Communities  
in the Middle School***

Leigh Van Horn

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*CREATING LITERACY COMMUNITIES  
IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL*

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Leigh Van Horn

Christopher-Gordon Publishers, Inc.  
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***CREATING LITERACY COMMUNITIES  
IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL***

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*DEDICATION*

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To Jerry

Who is always  
all that I hope for  
and more.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*Our Voices, Our Meanings* is a book about defining, establishing, and sustaining a literacy community in a 7th-grade reading classroom. It has long been a dream of mine to tell the story of the remarkable individuals who have shared this classroom with me. My deepest thanks go to my students who have enthusiastically joined me in this effort to go beyond the texts, to reflect, and to come to new understandings as we search for ways to make meaning and to make learning meaningful. This book would never have been possible without their willingness to think deeply and to share their insight with me. It is through my students that I have learned what it is to be a teacher.

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## INTRODUCTION

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As teachers we are always learning. We learn by listening to and reading the words of other teachers and those of our students. We peruse professional journals and texts about language and literacy, walk the hallways of our schools, peeking into classrooms, share wonderings and discoveries at conferences, and talk to teachers and students engaged in literacy. Listening, reading, and talking leads to further wondering.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) describe teachers who examine their practices as those who “pose problems, identify discrepancies between their theories and their practices, challenge common routines, and attempt to make visible much of what is taken for granted about teaching and learning” (p. 19). This book reflects my own efforts *and* those of my students to address these issues as we examine our literacy community, our meaning making, and the power structures within our community.

Each year, in the opening days of school as I watch and listen to my students, I wonder at the diversity in their approaches to reading and to their construction of meaning. Some students read curled up contently on the floor or under the table, devouring the words as others sit tensely at their desks gazing around the room or at the clock, counting the pages they have flipped past. When we talk about the meaning of reading, some say that reading means finishing the number of pages you are supposed to read. When I probe further, asking about the meaning we might discover when we think about what we read, some reveal that they think about what they are reading and compare it to their own experiences. Others state that reading for meaning is reading to find the answers to the teacher’s questions.

For four years my students and I examined our literacy practices as we developed a community of learners who read, questioned, talked, performed, wrote, and visually represented our meaning making and our lives together. Within the pages of this book you will read excerpts from the writings, discussions, and interviews of students from all of the classes I taught during this time. In the last year I chose a single class group that I determined to be the most representative and invited these students to go further with me in our examination of literacy practices. During one-on-one interviews, these students examined transcripts and tapes of our classroom discussions about literature as well as lists of our questions, comments, and observations about texts, talking with me about their processes and perceptions.

In the beginning of this examination I had a plan. I would observe my students and collect information in the form of checklists, anecdotal notes, journals, audio and visual tapes of classroom experiences and discussions, and copies of the students' written responses to literature. I believed that I alone would look at these artifacts of literacy, piecing together the elements of our literacy community and my students' meaning making processes. This is a true reflection of how it all began.

In the beginning, I did not plan to collect notes from my students, slips of paper thrust into my hands or placed upon my desk—paper worn thin as it was folded and unfolded and read again and again. I did not plan for my students to sit beside me and look at lists of their questions, comments, and observations about literature; to tell me how it is for them to do this thing, what it means to them, and what they think of when they reread what they have written. I did not plan for my students to read the transcripts of our conversations about literature and to talk with me about how they did this, what they fear, why it is important to them, and why it makes them feel important.

I did not plan to hear the voices of my students ringing in my ears or to feel them with me each and every day as I continued to think and to write. And yet, they were with me; and they *are* with me. It is not only my voice that you will read, it is our voices. Theirs are the voices at the center telling me, telling us, what we can do as teachers.

As my students accept and expand upon invitations to think about themselves and their literacy experiences, they exercise distinct and insightful voices. Anthony, for example, defines meaning making as a process of discovery in which we develop our own potential as we interpret and respond to literature. He writes,

Real knowledge is what we learn in here. We learn how to understand literature and respond and interpret it. We learn how to express our feelings about what we've read. We learn how to communicate with each other and to build upon each other's ideas. And all of us develop to a certain degree our inner genius. By saying "genius" I do not so much mean being able to score high on an I.Q. test or get all A's. I mean finding the inner talents we all possess and building upon them. I mean growing and finding your dreams. I mean discovering yourself.

The voices of these adolescents and those of other adolescents may reveal much to us about the impact and the influence of our ways of doing school. Although I am not suggesting that we as teachers simply ask our students what they want to do in school and how they want to "do" school, I am suggesting that we may learn a great deal about ourselves and our students if we place them in the center of our practice. We might consider whether our students understand the what and the why of the



classroom experience. We might talk to our students, asking them to reflect upon and to evaluate their experiences in our classrooms. We might ask them, "Why do you think we do this? Does this work for you? What could we do differently?" My own experiences have shown me that as I make notes about what students are saying and doing, tape record classroom interactions and discussions, engage students in explicit discussion of strategies, and invite them to collaborate with me on both curriculum and evaluation/assessment, they are both motivated and empowered as they begin to see themselves as participants in a study of our literacy practices.

Through ongoing exchanges in which we think and talk about what stands in the way of our learning and why we do the things we do, we and our students may be able to refine, customize, or transform the learning experience. This idea is expressed most powerfully by Maxine Greene (1988), who in writing about the transformations that occur through continued teaching and learning states that "we may be able to empower the young to create and re-create a common world, and, in cherishing it, in renewing it, discover what it signifies to be free" (p. 23).

Part I of this book (chapters 1–4) provides an introduction to our classroom. As you read, you will develop a view of the theories underpinning our practices as we define, develop, and sustain our literacy community, as we consider our life and literacy histories reflecting on what it is we know and how we come to know what we know. You will join us as we engage in questioning, commenting, observing, and talking about texts, and then as we reflect upon these processes.

Part II of this book (chapters 5–7) provides a practical view of the ways that our examination of community, meaning making, and the power structures within this classroom are reflected in the students' performance, writing, and visual representation of texts, and how these aspects of literacy contribute to further meaning making. Using my journals, audio and visual tapes, and excerpts from the students' products, I have attempted to reconstruct these experiences and present a picture that will enable you to "see" how we approach and work through each of these aspects of meaning making. In each section of these chapters you will read specific descriptions of what we do and what we think, as well as excerpts of the products of our experiences. In both parts of the book, where appropriate, I have included brief descriptions of the ways that we evaluate and assess our learning at the end of the chapter.

As you read, you may have questions about how this program fits into a prescribed curriculum. In this particular district, teams of teachers from various campuses and representing each grade level come together several times a year to evaluate and update our curriculum. Together we create lists of possible texts and descriptions of learning experiences and products based upon the elements of our standardized test (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, TAAS) and our English Language Arts and Reading performance standards (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, TEKS).

To read more about the standardized test and the performance standards you may want to visit these websites: <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/student.assessment/> and <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/teks/>. I have designed this program to incorporate the objectives of our academic skills for reading which are determining the meaning of words; identifying supporting ideas; summarizing; perceiving relationships and recognizing outcomes; analyzing information in order to make inferences and generalizations; and recognizing points of view, propaganda, and/or statements of fact and opinion in a variety of texts. Within a framework of texts and learning experiences designed to meet the interests and needs of my students I have also included opportunities for the students to develop their processes of reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and visually representing their meaning making as described in the performance standards.

In general, my own process has been to design curriculum centered on a particular novel, genre, or theme, and then to address the skills and standards of performance through our reading and response to the texts. As the students engage in literacy activities, they have authentic opportunities to learn about and to practice the processes of successful readers and writers within the context of the learning experience. I have found this way of working, rather than the overt teaching of skills out of context, to be both motivating and productive. In order to “prove” to myself that our ways of working enable my students to perform well on the required standardized test in our state, I have made it a practice to analyze the individual results of the testing of each student at the beginning and end of the year and to compare the results of my students with the results of other students. The results of these analyses have reassured me that the students not only perform well on the standardized reading test for the 7th grade, but that a number of them exceed their previous performances on the test.

Teaching and learning are creative, collaborative activities. With this in mind, I have made it a practice to “field test” and adapt my readings of reading/language arts research to my own classroom. As my students and I engage in these learning experiences we stop at various points to reflect, evaluate, and recreate the process to fit our particular needs. At the beginning of each year, I provide my students with a syllabus or outline of the year which includes titles of texts and possible responses (see appendix A). As the year unfolds, we may find that our interests or needs lead us in other directions. Through our collaboration, we will make changes in this outline. At the end of the year I ask my students to write to me about what they enjoyed the most, what worked for them, what did not work, and to offer their recommendations to me about what to include and what to eliminate in the plans for the following year. Their evaluations and my own records of what I see and hear as we work together help me to react to their immediate needs and to refine my plans for the future.

As I said at the beginning of this introduction, we as teachers, are always listening, reading, talking, wondering, and learning as we interact with one another and with our students. As you read the words that follow I hope that you will listen, read, talk, and wonder with us and that you will learn something that renews and supports what you are already doing or something that reveals new possibilities for your own literacy communities.

# CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	xiii
INTRODUCTION .....	xv
<b>CHAPTER 1: THE LITERACY COMMUNITY</b> .....	1
The Power of Belonging to a Group .....	1
A Picture of the School and the Students .....	7
Inside the Classroom .....	8
Making Personal Literacy Public .....	9
Organizing Our Community .....	9
Seating In Our Community .....	11
Developing a Literacy Community .....	12
Reading, Writing, and Response .....	13
Defining Reading .....	15
Our History as Readers and Writers .....	16
Sustaining the Literacy Community .....	17
The Learning Experience .....	19
Learning From One Another .....	19
Honoring the Products of Learning .....	22
Commitment to the Literacy Community .....	23
Expanding Our View of the Literacy Community .....	26
A New View of the Community .....	27
Are We Doing it Right? .....	30
The Community of Literary Texts .....	30
The Community of Authors .....	31
Sharing the Thoughts of Our Community .....	32
Evaluation/Assessment .....	33
Summary .....	34
<b>CHAPTER 2: DEFINING OURSELVES—REVEALING THE LITERACIES</b>	
<b>INSIDE US</b> .....	37
The Power of the Individual .....	37
School Literacy Experiences .....	38
Making Connections With Text .....	40
Constructing Life Maps .....	42
Reader of the Day .....	44
Introducing Reader of the Day .....	46
Who is Reading? .....	47
What is Valued? .....	49
What is Required of the Readers? .....	53
Conduct for Readers and Listeners .....	54

Choice of Texts .....	56
Collaborative Curriculum .....	60
Increased Awareness .....	61
Merging of Personal and Academic Literacy .....	62
Defining Ourselves Through Objects of Personal Significance .....	63
Collecting Tickets and Objects .....	64
Creating the Museum of Objects and Ideas .....	65
Reaction to the Museum of Objects and Ideas .....	67
Extending the Exploration .....	67
Prior Experiences With the Personal Essay .....	69
Reading in Search of a Model .....	70
Rereading to Analyze the Essay .....	71
First Steps: Talking and Listening .....	72
Writing Our Own Essays About Objects .....	73
Further Exploration .....	76
Thinking About the Experience .....	77
Defining Ourselves Through Poetry .....	77
Introducing the Idea .....	78
Students Writing About Themselves .....	80
Evaluation/Assessment .....	83
Summary .....	85
<b>CHAPTER 3: TRANSACTING WITH TEXT .....</b>	<b>89</b>
Questioning the Text .....	89
Student Involvement .....	92
Reading Together .....	93
Thinking Together .....	94
Looking at the Process .....	95
Taking a Closer Look .....	99
The Students' Perspectives .....	109
Their Initial Feelings .....	109
Ownership of Ideas .....	112
The Process and What it Means to Students .....	113
Evaluation of the Process .....	114
Moving to Silent, Independent Reading .....	118
Introducing the Books and the Process .....	119
Difficulties and Transformations .....	120
Writing Notes to One Another .....	123
Reading and Thinking on Our Own .....	126
Evaluation/Assessment .....	128
Summary .....	129
<b>CHAPTER 4: THE POWER OF TALK .....</b>	<b>133</b>
Developing Ideas About Talk .....	133

Opening Conversations .....	136
Balance of Power in Conversations .....	144
Talking in Small Groups .....	150
Evaluation/Assessment .....	161
Summary .....	162
<b>CHAPTER 5: LIVING THE MEANINGS THROUGH PERFORMANCE .....</b>	<b>165</b>
Developing Ideas About Performance .....	165
Was It Always Like This? .....	167
Choral Reading .....	168
<i>The Van Gogh Café</i> .....	169
Character Interrogation .....	174
The Poetry Café .....	178
Compare and Contrast .....	179
Performing Poetry .....	180
The Radio Play .....	182
Listening to Learn .....	183
Practicing and Further Planning .....	184
Commercial Break .....	184
Connections .....	185
A Shakespearean Play .....	185
Why <i>Macbeth</i> ? .....	186
Setting the Stage .....	186
Preparing for Production .....	187
Filming the Play .....	188
Taking a Bow .....	189
The Curtain Closes .....	189
Evaluation/Assessment .....	190
Summary .....	191
<b>CHAPTER 6: THE POWER OF WRITING .....</b>	<b>193</b>
Developing Our Writing Power .....	193
Responding to Photographs .....	196
Re-envisioning <i>The Van Gogh Café</i> .....	200
<i>Canyons</i> .....	205
Making Connections .....	205
Creating Journals .....	207
Finding Poetry in the Prose .....	209
Writing to the Author .....	213
<i>The Outsiders</i> .....	214
Outsiders and Friends .....	214
Considering the Setting .....	219
The Mystery .....	221
The Elements of Mystery .....	221

A Detective's Notebook .....	227
<i>Macbeth</i> : A Myriad of Meanings .....	232
Finding Poetry in the Play .....	233
Conclusions About <i>Macbeth</i> .....	236
Evaluation/Assessment .....	240
Summary .....	242
<b>CHAPTER 7: THE POWER OF VISUAL REPRESENTATION</b> .....	245
Reading, Writing, and Works of Art .....	245
Beginning by Remembering .....	246
Constructing a Collage .....	250
Creating a Wallet .....	251
Creating Paper Characters .....	255
Visual Representations of a Theme .....	256
Creating Ransom Note Mystery Poems .....	256
Spelling Out <i>The Giver</i> .....	257
Piecing Together a Survival Quilt .....	258
Evaluation/Assessment .....	260
Conclusion .....	261
Appendix A: Course Syllabus .....	263
Appendix B: Meeting Objectives Checklist .....	269
Appendix C: Museum of Objects and Ideas Planning Sheet .....	270
Appendix D: Museum of Objects and Ideas Rubric .....	272
Appendix E: Essay About Object of Personal Significance Rubric ....	273
Appendix F: "I Am" Poem Planning Sheet .....	275
Appendix G: Questions, Comments, and Observations	
— <i>Double Trouble Squared</i> .....	276
Appendix H: Questions, Comments, and Observations	
— <i>Canyons</i> .....	281
Appendix I: Questions, Comments and Observations	
— <i>The Outsiders</i> .....	288
Appendix J: Questions, Comments, and Observations	
— <i>The Giver</i> .....	292
Appendix K: Transcript of Discussion of <i>The Outsiders</i> .....	299
Appendix L: Evaluation Sheet—Mystery Suspense	
Theater Radio Show .....	307
Appendix M: Commercial for Mystery Suspense Theater	
Radio Show Planning Sheet .....	308
Appendix N: Survival Across Time Project Planning Sheet .....	310
Appendix O: Response Options/Specifications Planning Sheet .....	312
Appendix P: Paper Bag Mystery Planning Sheet .....	314
Appendix Q: You Are The Detective!!! Planning Sheet .....	316
Appendix R: Detective Notebook Rubric .....	317

Appendix S:	Character Sketch in a Wallet Planning Sheet .....	318
Appendix T:	Letter to the Owner of Your Wallet Rubric.....	319
Appendix U:	Paper Characters and Character Profile Planning Sheet .....	320
<b>REFERENCES</b>	.....	<b>323</b>
<b>LITERATURE USED</b>	.....	<b>326</b>
<b>INDEX</b>	.....	<b>329</b>
<b>ABOUT THE AUTHOR</b>	.....	<b>337</b>



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# THE LITERACY COMMUNITY

## THE POWER OF BELONGING TO A GROUP

*While Don was reading I was watching you. Your face caught my eye. I saw you looking at him and you looked so proud. Then when Brian patted him on the back you smiled. But it wasn't a regular smile, it was one of those smiles like if you're watching your child walk or ride a bike for the first time. It's a proud smile.... As this whole situation was going on I had a smile on my face too. But it wasn't like your smile. This was a wow smile. I was thinking, wow, this is such a special moment for her.... Just watching you and Don made me want to cry. But I didn't, I just smiled.*

Brandi

Beginnings, first impressions, I recall our coming to know one another as readers and writers, and as people; as I think about our literacy community and what it has come to mean, how it enables us to begin and sustain our search for meaning, and how this often leads to our empowerment, I wonder how best to open the story. Should I begin with possible definitions of the literacy community itself, or should I describe our own beginnings? While weighing the possibilities I came across the note above, handed to me by Brandi on her way out the door after class one day in mid-April of our year together. It occurs to me that I can start in the middle.

I remember this moment well. Don had always made us laugh. It wasn't unusual for him to come to class dragging a slightly worn Kermit the Frog puppet by the hand. In fact, Don would sometimes use Kermit to