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Expanding Representations for Historical Content in Literacy

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Expanding Representations for Historical Content in Literacy

Cover Page Footnote

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Expanding Representations for Historical Content in Literacy

Literacy educators enrich their professional toolkits with a historical understanding of the field. In our argument for the need for an increased focus on history in the preparation of literacy educators, we look, perhaps unsurprisingly, back into history. Three decades ago, in an interview with Richard Robinson (1990), E. Jennifer Monaghan, one of the literacy field's most effective advocates for history, offered a case for the history of reading.

Looking at the history of a subject gives us a perspective that no other approach can offer. It prevents us from falsifying the past, whether by romanticizing it or downgrading it unfairly. It also enables us to detect swings of the pendulum as well as identify fads. History makes one think, too. It's easier to see where things go wrong in contexts that are different from our own. Then you use those insights to analyze the present. (p. 151)

Even though Monaghan's words are from 30 years ago, her argument for understanding the history of reading speaks to current needs in the field. Current literacy educators live amidst daily reminders for reexamining the past, particularly in regard to issues of race and equity. Literacy was and is instrumental in the unequal allocation of rights and goods (Stuckey, 1991; Lankshear & Lawler, 1987). Literacy educators also habitually face reductionist debates over the role of phonics in literacy education, currently labeled the Science of Reading. Understanding the historical nature of this psycholinguistic puzzle may provide new insight. In these two examples, the history of our professional field offers the potential to understand and to critically examine current issues that are at the heart of the field, rather than considering these issues as strictly contemporary phenomena.

Yet, in spite of the recognized need for history in the preparation of literacy professionals there is little progress toward this end. Across the U.S. there are only a few courses dedicated

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exclusively to the history of reading or literacy (DeJulio et al., 2021). In other courses, history may get little more than a few paragraphs or pages at the beginning of a course. One further challenge to supporting literacy educators with an understanding of the history of the field is that even when history is part of a course, it is often presented in ways that do little to encourage appreciation for history, or its usefulness in the present. History might take the form of older literacy professionals telling stories as the “sage on the stage,” or perhaps the fetishizing of literacy’s history by holding up old books. Both of these approaches might be enjoyable for the instructor, who perhaps collects stories and artifacts from literacy’s past, and maybe even for some of the students. But these march-of-time chronologies and reading artifacts offer less in terms of promoting literacy as a valuable part of developing a professional repertoire.

According to Stahl and Hartman (2020) *history is a happening*. Every aspect of a happening—a person, object, identity, event, action, symbol, thought, etc.—from the beginning of time until this moment, is history. Likewise, history is a *reconstruction* of the past. It is a refabricating of something that once was. It is not the same thing as the actual event or episode. History is a “making again” of a happening, account, or explanation that re-presents that which already happened. But traditional history restricts itself to the *known* past. There is much in the past that was and happened, but we can only know pieces and parts of it because of the paucity of evidence that remains. That which can be known, then, is that which has been saved or survived into the present for our interpretations and reconstructions. There were also events that were the undocumented efforts of marginalized participants. These events must be resuscitated. The literacy historian must therefore delve into the roots of current literacy practices, techniques, or strategies to understand whether they were developed to meet instructional parameters that may no longer exist. Historically-informed literacy professionals can learn whether or not they

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have fallen victim to the “confusions of time” such that application and delivery no longer resemble the original constructs (Skager & Weinberg, 1971).

Our purpose in this article is not to critique particular methods of teaching literacy history. Rather, we desire an expansion of historical engagement with literacy and present several approaches for instructors who want to embed or even expand history into current literacy courses, particularly at the graduate level. Some of these strategies can be used in courses focused primarily on literacy history or even in courses that are not focused on history at all. Importantly, the approaches focus on ways of making literacy history meaningful to emerging literacy educators, rather than a mere transmission of dates, facts, and names. We propose three general approaches to bringing the history of literacy to life: **inquiry-based learning**, including student-selected and designed projects, instructor-guided problem posing, and uncovering one’s own history; **dramatic structures**, including short-term projects such as fishbowl, mantle of expert and tableaux, and longer-term approaches that include readers theater and process drama; and **humanistic approaches**, including biographical studies, oral histories, and primary source explorations among others. Each of these three approaches is presented with examples.

Inquiry-based approaches and the history of literacy

One approach to enhancing the depth of knowledge in historical literacy research is through inquiry-based approaches (Lammert, 2020). Historically-speaking, inquiry has been applied in a variety of contexts through a multitude of approaches. Two broad categories of inquiry-based approaches can be classified as *interest-based* and *project-based*. Interest-based inquiry is most often anchored in the work of Dewey (1910), whose focus was on the interests and questions of the learner. In Dewey’s approach, it is the learner who formulates and pursues

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questions around their own experiences, interests, and understandings. The student's questions are at the forefront, though the teacher supports the student throughout the inquiry process. As an example, for a graduate student who is interested in learning more about how reading adoptions have changed over time, the instructor might provide support by thinking through which questions would be most enlightening, interesting, and answerable about the topic. The instructor might also help by directing the student toward secondary sources, such as Smith's (2002) *American Reading Instruction* or more overtly political resources like Shannon's (1989) *Broken Promises*. Likewise, the instructor might also point out primary sources, either physical ones or scans available online resources (e.g., digitized archives such as the *Rossetti Archives* at the University of Virginia; McGann, 1994). Such an approach to literacy history could be considered a small one. Hoffman (PALS Mentoring, 2020) uses the term "small-i inquiry" to describe an approach to inquiry in which the teacher supports the student to "identify and dig into moments of curiosity expressed by [the learner]" (2:00). Such an inquiry might be short-lived, and the student might turn their interest to other areas of interest. However, moments of small-i inquiry can sometimes turn into deeper explorations that a learner can sustain over days, weeks, months, or years.

The beginnings of problem-based approaches are often attributed to Kilpatrick (1925), who focused on a question or problem provided by the teacher. Although Kilpatrick built on the work of Dewey, he did not focus on the interests of learners. For example, using the problem-based approach, an instructor might pose a question about literacy limits and resulting surreptitious literacy practices of enslaved people around the time of the U.S. Civil War. Within this topic, students might explore instructional materials, focus on Antebellum literacy practices, explore slave narratives available through the Library of Congress, or a host of other foci.

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Practically speaking, teachers can create problem areas to be resolved, or questions to be answered, in which the entire group of students can collectively focus on constitutive smaller bits. Problem-based approaches to literacy history allow the instructor to focus on a smaller number of resources that can possibly be shared among the students, allowing for students' collaborative research and composing. Of course, a trade-off comes in the potential decrease in agency on the part of learners who might or might not be interested in the topic garnered by the teacher.

In addition to considering the inquiry-based approach in terms of the teacher's engagement, another important consideration is the relevance to the individual learner's particular histories. Within both of these approaches, there are considerable opportunities for learners to make connections to their own lives. Such connections can be particularly powerful for students whose histories have been ignored or erased, and whose unique literacy practices may have been suppressed in classrooms. Exploring one's own suppressed literacy history can allow learners to deconstruct and reconstruct histories of literacy through a personal inquiry approach. Not only do such explorations offer meaningful explorations of history for the learner, they also challenge narrow versions of literacy, as well as offer deeper, more complex understandings of history. The exploration of literacy history related to one's own life will be discussed further in the autobiography section later in the article.

The approaches, *interest-based* and *project-based*, are at two points of an inquiry spectrum, but inquiry need not be considered as such a binary. Just as Dewey (1938) warned of falling into the "either/or" philosophy (p. 242), these approaches should not be considered as limiting. Instead, in an application of an inquiry-based approach, careful consideration guides the degree to which inquiry is learner-centered or instructor-led.

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Dramatic structures that engage with the history of literacy

In using dramatic structures to examine historical data, current and future literacy researchers afford themselves opportunities to think expansively about data, as well as about their performances in the analysis. This presentation removes the veil and burden of “knower” and places *all* participants on equal footing in the role of “other.” Dramatic performance is a set of signs--text, choreography, music, spoken word, imagery, theater, and/or art. Performance ethnographers use this rich array of signs to tell stories, purposefully designing aesthetic moments to embody enactments of the cultural others under investigation. From a critical perspective, performance ethnographers use “theater as a weapon” or the opportunity for liberation and transformation (Boal, 1979, p. ix). From an historical stance, the other is created through time shifting (Fabian, 1986). Bolton (1979) suggested that drama is concerned with a “change of insight”—arguably a focus of historical research and inquiry. The purpose of these dramatic structures is to engage participants in a series of experiences with historical data to examine interpretive acts in time and space.

Part of the potential of dramatic structures lies in their power as ritual experiences. Schechner (2006) stated that rituals are “among the most powerful experiences life has to offer” in that while people are in such “liminal states,” they are taken out of the demands of everyday life and “uplifted, swept away, taken over” (p. 70). Furthermore, while immersed in ritually inspired experiences, people “feel at one with their comrades,” and “personal and social differences are set aside” (p. 70). Turner (2004) used the term “communitas” to describe this experience of “ritual camaraderie.”

Process drama is both a tool for instruction as well a way of learning (Heathcote & Bolton 1995; O’Neill, 1995). Unlike formal theater, process drama is spontaneous and

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unscripted; it relies on the interactions of participants in order to manifest. Process drama uses reliable techniques to guide the participants through layers of analysis and through different representations of data.

Through *tableaux*, and other forms of “communal vessels,” participants can walk back through data from the perspectives of multiple participants. Process drama can manipulate roles, perform in roles, imagine spaces as “the enacted real,” embrace reflective distance, the view from the interstices of disequilibrium. As a result, drama helps participants *visualize*. Visualization helps participants *personalize*. Personalization helps participants *empathize*.

Heathcote and Bolton (1995) describe the “*mantle of the expert*” as an approach to learning through drama into education. Mantle of expert works emerge from a specified task or event. Participants must be conscious of what they are learning, and they must be responsible for the learning as it occurs. Since instructors are included as participants, they play within (and with) the role of an expert. They are asked to play a role with which they are very familiar--expert. However, rather than engage in the act of “knowing,” instructors suspend their typical pedagogical processes and engage in acts of imagination. When instructors back up, and allow others to be knowers, different kinds of participation space become available to students *and* instructors. Mantle of expert work allows all participants to enter a drama, focusing on their particular and unique responses. Then, as the drama progresses, participants’ thoughts and responses are extended and shaped by exposure to the responses of others.

This larger view of performance privileges change, and allows opportunities for performers to engage in shape-shifting behaviors, which “value the carnivalesque over the canonical, the transformative over the normative, the mobile over the monumental” (Conquergood, 1995, p. 138). Similarly, working within these imagined settings suggests

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affordances for activity and a range of possible roles (Hare & Blumberg, 1988). Likewise, these settings also evoke frames (Goffman, 1974) for action. As Hare and Blumberg noted “frames are constructed in order to make sense of complex happenings of nature and the doings of persons...they answer the question ‘What is going on here?’” (Hare & Blumberg, 1988, p. 70).

Analysis in process drama can focus on the “structure of experience” at delineated, particular moments. As participants frame their analyses of process drama, we “obtain a sense of what is going on but will also (in some degree) become spontaneously engrossed, caught up, enthralled” (Goffman, 1974, p. 345). To these ends, participants engage in various physical and performative frames for historical analyses. In the fishbowl, participants are above and behind the designated presenters. In the readers’ theater, an audience may be positioned as spectators interpreting against the performers, and observing. In the tableaux, participants are internalized in the alleyways of the tableaux. In these and other interpretive, dramatic structures, we call on participants to speak about the chorographic effects of their multiple positions.

In the following scenario, we offer a look at how different dramatic structures might be deployed to understand video data from a clinical intervention. King and Stahl (2012) have proposed that the historical timeline of the field across the past 100+ years can be broken “moments” (e.g., instructional, clinical, cognitive, collaborative, critical and media). In each historical moment the approach to supporting a “remedial,” an “at-risk,” an “under-achieving” reader would have been subtly or whole heartedly different. For instance, clinical interviews were a common literacy practice during “the Clinical Moment.”

To lead graduate students to fully understand the evolution of “remediation” across moments we suggest that extended learning from dramatic or performative engagement with recorded literacy events may provide productive engagement with many forms of literacy

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process. As an example, with a “literacy assessment” course of 18 students, the group could be divided into triads which each being assigned a particular moment in literacy history from which to view a video of literacy work between a student and a teacher. The following set of activities would be assigned and carried out across the semester.

- 1. Fishbowl:** The dramatic engagement begins with viewing an excerpt of video of a “problem reader” who is reading aloud in a small group (permissions would have been acquired). While the student could be an actual student, the reading event could also be staged.
- 2. Mantle of the Expert:** Small groups of participants are each assigned to observe the reader from the perspectives of different historical moments in literacy. As the video replayed, the small groups consider the reader from their unique perspectives. (“Describe the ways in which the reader contributed to group. What do you notice?”) During this second viewing of the video, attendees will write field notes based on their observations, from their different paradigmatic stances (based on moments in the history of literacy), and discuss what they are recording in their groups. A review of professional texts and instruments from the moment would be necessitated.
- 3. Tableaux:** Each paradigmatic group will create a tableau (i.e., living photograph) to represent their unique perspective on the reader’s work on the video. The groups will interpret each other’s tableaux. For example, participants who observed the reader with a clinical perspective will create a frozen scene that represents their collective interpretation of the reader’s participation, to be analyzed by the other groups. By embodying the reader and freezing interpretations in time, attendees will begin to *experience* different perspectives based on unique times in reading’s history.

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4. **Readers' Theatre:** In the same “reader moment groups,” participants will present a readers’ theatre re-enactment their data collection and research completed as a group. For example, as the clinical group acts out their written claims about the read-aloud video from their fieldnotes, other published research, and recommendations, eliciting the participants’ identification with/against our interpretations of “their” participants. In doing so, conflict will emerge that will serve as the focus for the remaining drama work.
5. **Process Drama:** Participants may continue the above scene(s), off script. In role, participants can join our “data analysis meeting,” or IEP staffings, as additional researchers. (Attendees may join the presentation space or speak into the scene with comments.) The audience interjections will invite interruption and result in shifting frames of reference.
6. **The activities may conclude** with a discussion of the paucity and possibilities of thought in researcher stances, dramatic frames, and intellectual spaces that cross time and moment boundaries. The *possibilities* embrace “the somatic,” “the provocative,” “the artistic” and “the edgy.” But these very acts of richness are as *disciplined* as inquiry.

Historical Methods in the History of Literacy

The third category of pedagogical activities for introducing neophyte learners to the field of literacy history involves them in the beginning steps of being a historian through the processes of using the tenets of historiographical methods that could lead to professional presentations and even publication. The two primary categories include seven subcategories: 1. *Historical Methods* (using primary sources, using secondary sources, using digital resources), and 2. *Historical Projects* (biographical studies, author studies, oral histories, autobiography).

Historical Methods

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Graduate students and undergraduates alike will benefit from having opportunities to interact with both primary and secondary sources. Indeed, one of the first actions on the part of the instructor is to make sure that the students understand the difference between the two sources.

Primary sources are original documents, artifacts, remains, or relics associated with the topic under investigation. Documents and artifacts are records of eyewitnesses or direct outcomes of incidents. These items are intentionally or unintentionally left in order to provide a firsthand record of an event. With primary sources "Only the mind of the observer intrudes between the original event and the investigator" (Ary et al., 2002). Primary sources include curricular *units*, instructional *texts* and consumable teaching *materials*, *digitized records*, and school sites *walks* (Butchart, 1986; McCulloch & Richardson, 2000).

Primary sources may be found in special collections from around the country in academic collections at universities such as the University of Pittsburgh (the Nietz Old Textbook Collection, <https://pitt.libguides.com/nietz>) and Northern Illinois University (the Blackwell History of Education Museum, <https://www.cedu.niu.edu/blackwell/index.shtml>) or governmental collections associated with the Library of Congress, or in state-maintained archives. However, in many academic contexts the opportunity for students to interact with old texts and instructional materials may be dependent on instructors' personal collections. For an instructor who may desire starting such a personal collection, a first step would be to review a number of secondary sources and then based on a list of references generated from reviewing these sources use the digital marketplace (e.g., AbeBooks) to procure texts. If one is looking for primary sources that reflect the pedagogical practices in the localized area, then visits to used

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bookstores and antique stores can be productive. Retiring teachers wishing to donate materials in support of training future teachers may also be a valuable source.

Secondary sources do not have a direct relationship of the case under study (Stahl & Hartman, 2020). The individual who is writing or talking about the event was not present as the event unfolded. Rather, the narrator obtained the description of the event or era from another source, which may or may not have been a primary source. A goodly number of individuals who have entered the professoriate in the literacy field have relied on secondary sources to develop a passing knowledge of the history of literacy, and they have passed this practice on to their graduate students. For decades, the standard text purporting to be a history of literacy was Nila Banton Smith's tome entitled *American Reading Instruction* (2002). Individuals who wrote methods texts with the perfunctory chapter on the history of the field have also drawn heavily from Smith's work and at times the work of Mathews (1966) entitled *Teaching to Read: Historically Considered*. Both of these texts, along with several similar works (see DeJulio et al., 2021) have strengths as well as weaknesses. But any single text used as a proxy for the history of the field of literacy cannot lead a reader to develop a historical mindset for the field.

Digital sources. In decades past, the literacy historian would be required to travel to special collections to be able to study primary sources. If secondary sources were not available at one's own academic library, interlibrary loan and/or the used book market became the necessary approaches to obtaining texts. Now, in the third decade of the 21st century, the budding historian is able to make use of a range of digital collections and sources.

Digital sources are historical documents and artifacts from an institution's collection that have been digitized and made available via computer mediated services. Materials are shared in an asynchronous manner although in some cases synchronous support may be provided by a

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reference librarian. For our purposes we propose that three forms exist: 1. Resources found in a special collection have been digitalized and available on-line, 2. An institution with a special collection has provided digital presentations about historical documents via its web site, and 3. A special collection has a standard web page detailing the resources in the respective archival collections.

When literacy instructors introduce either graduate or undergraduate students to the texts and instructional materials from eras past at a rather basic, entry level, we recommend that such be done through a process where primary sources, secondary sources, and digital sources are used in tandem. For want of a better term we see this as a form of a multimodal historiographic survey where one source builds upon another synergistically in promoting deeper levels of understanding a historical era. One hopes that such an activity leads to an interest and appreciation of literacy history on the part of the undergraduate or graduate student. Still, except in few cases, will this initial exploratory experience lead students to desire to make the history of the field a focused component of their personal literacy philosophy. And perhaps, given either the personal or professional developmental stage of an undergraduate student, particularly those of the traditional higher education age cohort, we cannot expect undergraduates to do such.

However, it *can* be expected that graduate students seeking a reading specialist's certification along with the master's degree, and especially those students seeking the doctorate in literacy, should be expected to gain the knowledge and develop the dispositions about the history of the field, a competence expected of a member of the professional community. A brief reconnoiter from 20,000 feet will not promote a historically focused professional worldview. Here course instructors must involve students in *doing history*, or what DeJulio et al. (2021) have

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called historying. A set of historical projects that build upon a developmental construct now follow.

Historical Projects

Here we cover historical studies that lead students into the field of literacy history. They are presented in a sequencing that begins with an inward-looking historical perspective and moves into historical work with targeted populations. These are followed by activities requiring students to use both primary and secondary sources as well as texts and artifacts that could be removed in time and space.

- 1. Autobiography:** An autobiography is a text where the narrator is the central figure, but it is "a privileged but troubled narrative because it is both subjective and objective, reflective and reflexive" (Bruner, 2004, p. 693). An autobiography is multilayered and selective, and it can be deconstructed from many perspectives: personal, cultural, interpersonal, ideological, linguistic, and so on. It is built from facts, themes, actors, a sequence, a plot, agency, coherence, situatedness and a sense of audience, all of which are elements of a true discourse (Cohen et al., 2018).
- 2. Literacy “Autobiography”:** In many undergraduate reading methods courses, there is a rather customary assignment where students develop a rather brief reading autobiography during the first week of the academic term. While the practice has some benefit in promoting a degree of self-reflection and allows the instructor to have a look at the attitudes of the students in the class, the brevity of the assignment does little to actually promote a historical appreciation by the students. This does not have to be the case. We propose that the assignment be tailored to evolve across a semester. Here students are required to review and then analyze how the instructional methods and materials along

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with other forms of text (both traditional and digital) from across their lifespans influenced their academic and personal lives at specific developmental stages and at the current moment. The evolving literacy autobiography would also include an evaluation of the role family members, teachers, friends, and other influential individuals played in developing one's literacy worldview. A formal, critical analysis would be required as the culmination to the project.

3. **Oral History:** Oral history is a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events. Oral history is both the oldest type of historical inquiry, predating the written word, and one of the most modern, initiated with tape recorders in the 1940s and now using 21st-century digital technologies (Oral History Association, www.oralhistory.org). Oral history (life history) revolving around literacy requires students to step beyond the personal perspective to learn of how literate lives have evolved for other selected individuals. For future teachers, an oral history interview might focus on a seasoned teacher in one's selected specialization. An individual training to teach dual language learners might focus on individuals who learned to read in another country. A future reading specialist would naturally conduct an oral history with a reading specialist of longstanding. Finally, a prospective member of the professoriate might interview a member of the Reading Hall of Fame (<https://www.readinghalloffame.org>). Whole class projects might include the development of an archive and certainly a sharing of what might be learned across the class data set.
4. **Author study:** An author study gives students the opportunity to delve deeply into a scholar's life and body of work. The project leads the students to 1. critically evaluate an

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author's line of scholarship, dissemination sources, and writing style across time and movements; 2. make connections between the author's life and work; and 3. make personal connections between one's own experiences/philosophies and those of the author/scholar (revised from Reading Rockets at <https://www.readingrockets.org/books/authorstudy/reasons>). An author study might best be used with graduate students, as they have likely developed an area for professional interest or future research. Hence, having an in-depth knowledge about an individual's contributions to a line of scholarship or research methodology would be particularly useful in helping a student's professional worldview to take shape. Other uses would include the study of the works of children's literature or young adolescent literature authors. Such a project requires the student to step back and integrate the knowledge gained with his/her current place in the profession as well as a consideration of how the knowledge gained provides direction for self-growth and direction throughout the graduate experience or in the early years in the professoriate.

- 5. Biography:** The interpretive biographical method...involves the studied use and collection of personal-life documents, stories, accounts, and narratives which describe turning-point moments in individuals' lives. The subject matter of the biographical method is the life experiences of a person (Denzin, 1989). In this hierarchy, biography would be considered a more sophisticated study than an author study as the focus moves beyond an individual's scholarship so as to explore an individual life in its totality. A biography begins with the individual's birth and moves through the stages of life where the period in the profession, whether as an educator, a researcher, a theorist, an author, or any combination is but a component of the work (e.g., Stahl & Hartmen, 2020). The

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outcome for the student is not just to learn about an individual's scholarly contributions but to also learn more about foundational events that influenced a person's life progression as well as about life in the academy and beyond the academy.

Conclusion - Invitation

We have addressed two agendas with this paper. The first is to reinforce the importance of learning from literacy's past in order to more effectively live in our present. This is a persuasive message based on instrumental arguments, relying on facts, cause and effect, and effectiveness of practice (see also DeJulio et al., 2021). We believe in these attributes and their applicability to the field of literacy. As a professional field, we remain tied to our past, to the earlier practices that gave rise to what we are now. It is important to know from whence we came. Secondly, and more specifically, we also suggest with this article that the inclusion and focus on the historical aspects of literacy need not be a drudge. In fact, historying literacy (Stahl & Hartman, 2021) is enjoyable, productive, and engaging. In this article we have shared a number of potential approaches to support future educators in exploring the history of the literacy field. The inquiry-based approaches, dramatic structures, and humanistic approaches we have outlined in this paper offer pathways for instructors, who can build opportunities to explore the history of the literacy field within their courses and programs. Not only can these approaches be used flexibly, they allow learners to make connections to literacy history in ways that more traditional approaches may not. In doing so, emerging literacy educators can leave their programs with better senses of the field's history, which subsequently leaves them better prepared to critically examine and address the challenges that face them in the present and the future.

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