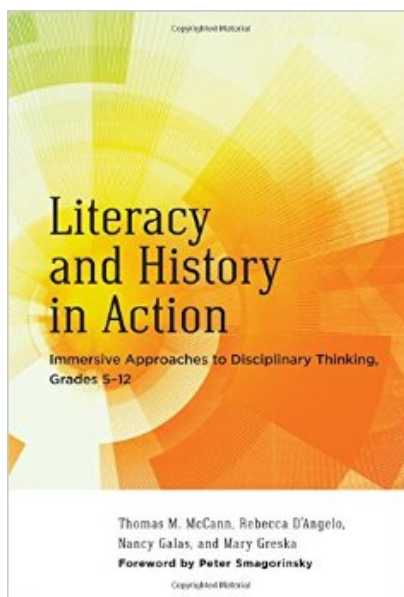# JoLLE@UGA®

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

Review of *Literacy and history in action: Immersive approaches to disciplinary thinking, grades 5-12*

Reviewer Justin Dooly
The University of Georgia, Athens, GA

Introduction

Literacy and History in Action: Immersive Approaches to Disciplinary Thinking, Grades 5-12 by Thomas McCann, Rebecca D'Angelo, Nancy Galas, and Mary Greska presents the potential impact of one discipline based inquiry approach (i.e., simulations) as a way to demonstrate the authors' concerns for "how real students react to them, how they learn content knowledge, and how they produce elaborated written responses."(McCann et al., 2015, p.119) in the context of promoting "purpose driven literacy" (e.g., talking, listening, reading, research, and writing) (p. 119). McCann and the authors described simulations as a "discussion-based inquiry activity" founded on role-playing and character immersion (pp. 3, 5). The authors suggested that in order for a strong role-playing scenario to occur, several components must be present. First, a setting must be established in context (i.e., history). Second, characters must populate this setting to authenticate the game. Next, a challenge must face the simulation in order to complicate the scenario and allow for multiple perspectives. This can be done through introducing a bill or calling a town meeting. In all, these simulations engage students in discussions that generate reflective writing that explores and argues.

For the purposes of this research, the authors demonstrated a disciplined approach to history and have described such an approach as requiring "the examination of contrasting accounts of the events of history, requiring both synthesis and critical judgement." (McCann et al., 2015, p. 128). Further detail was provided in regards to what a disciplinary approach to history looks like in terms of various research as well as through the C3 Framework (National Council for Social Studies [NCSS], 2013). While this research was not intended to serve as a curriculum guide, the detail in describing the simulations and how to introduce these activities keeps educators in mind.

In short, the research is divided into three generalizable sections. First, the authors dedicated a section toward framing how the use of simulation as a pedagogy produces authentic discussion and collaboration, while also modeling appropriate writing strategies. In the second section, the authors described three simulations (e.g., Native American reparations, Living the Colonial Experience: Elmtown, and The Road to Appomattox) not only through the context of establishing appropriate discussion and modeling history discipline techniques (e.g., researching, citing, forming an argument), but by also including excerpts and commentary to bring clarity to how these simulations impacted student literacy. In terms of assessment, the research adhered to a strict alliance with Common Core Standards, the C3 Framework, and referential grade level data. The authors concluded with a discussion of the studies' effects, limitations, and purposes.

Literacy Implications & Questions

Specifically, purpose-driven literacy includes: talking, listening, reading, researching, and writing; in order to develop a disciplined pedagogy, students must ascertain these critical literacy and history skills. In reference to students, McCann, D'Angelo, Galas, and Greska (2015) noted that, "they learn the complexities of making inferences, critically evaluating what they read, and writing meaningful elaborated compositions because they have a *purpose* for doing so" (p. 10). This echoes Bain (2008), who argued that learning demanded meaning over memory, and in many instances, students demonstrated this critical thought through written responses and oral discussion. Within excerpts of teacher-

modeled discussion, the data displays students thinking critically, respectfully interacting with other students' thoughts, and then building a discussion based on the comments at hand as seen in segments from pages 24, 25, and 28. In these numerous oral excerpts, students demonstrated their ability to not only talk to one another, but also – and perhaps more importantly – to listen to one another.

To continue, reading was also at the heart of each of the three simulations. In order for these simulations to be successful, students must research, and research requires literacy in order to understand perspectives, history, culture, etc. However, reading in the sense of The Appomattox Road took on a new initiative. Students received a series of rather common letters during the game. More impressive is the inclusion of the Library of Congress and correlating photographs that can and were used to add additional immersive elements to the students' reading. The authors commented about how the students appreciated this aspect and included easily accessible references for others, which reveals that this research keeps educators in mind.

The last concept for purpose-driven literacy is perhaps the most iconic: writing. One aspect that may have been over-emphasized in this section was perhaps vocabulary development. In the chapters dedicated to the Elmtown simulation, one section was dedicated on building students content language in preparation for the discussion and written prompts. Numerous vocabulary words were included in this description and presumably in the instruction itself, however, when analyzing the two student responses, none of the content vocabulary words were used to augment the written reflections. It seems then, that defining and infusing context specific language provides little support for increasing vocabulary retention and application through simulation pedagogy. To this end, more research should be conducted in order to determine effective pedagogy for increasing vocabulary development.

Lastly, despite these amazingly detailed accounts and excerpts, the research and presentation remain anecdotal, and while the authors defend this form in a section dedicated to the study's limitations, this is still cause for concern. The students whose written responses and oral interactions used were no doubt exemplary in terms of critical thinking; if not, their responses would not have been used to develop the research argument. Given this, how were other interactions and written responses? The authors point out that all involved were held to the same standard and that everyone provided "quite elaborate writing and showed growth" (McCann et al., 2015, p. 70), yet only a select few with similar highly elaborated responses were chosen to demonstrate the research. This lack of diversity is troubling, and begs the question of how well other students participated in these activities. Despite qualifications from researchers, this is an important thought to consider, even more so when faced with the real possibility of incorporating English-Learners, low-income children, and academically struggling students into the mix.

History Through a Disciplinary Approach?

The pedagogical framework used in this research was drawn from the C3 Framework (National Council for Social Studies [NCSS], 2013). This framework was the context for defining a disciplined approach to history through presenting compelling and supporting question; shared research into engaging questions while determining significance; respect and understanding for competing perspectives that allow for consultation and evaluation; creating judgements that lead to questioning why events occurred and how to find solutions for these issues. The C3 Framework (National Council for Social Studies [NCSS], 2013) aligns with Common Core Standards, which "emphasize rigorous

reading, writing, listening, and speaking goals" (McCann et al., 2015, p. 8), and is demonstrated throughout the text in numerous examples. The authors use these standards as a way to emulate pedagogy in a way that resembles an historian's approach to understanding history. In one assignment, Georgina Tierney, a student in one of the simulations, depicted this disciplined mentality in "Colonist vs. British".

"But balance isn't' black and white, good and evil, right and wrong, innocent and guilty. Balance is more of a gray on both sides... Simply because some of their number had made a rather rash and unwise move, the whole city was to accept consequence for their actions, such as getting a burn. But the Colonists felt rather as if they had gotten a burn simply for sitting by the fire." (McCann et al., 2015, pp. 68, 70).

In this segment, Tierney's response models some of the criteria used to link simulations and subsequent written and oral responses to disciplinary thinking, however, certain elements suggest otherwise.

To clarify this issue, one must first turn to social studies education research. Leming (1994) advocates for educational teaching practices contingent on standardized testing and knowledge transmission. While simulations certainly attest to bolstering content knowledge, the critical thought and higher order thinking presented in the research contradicts Leming; therefore, eliminates Traditional Social Studies Instruction (TSSI) as representative for simulations.

Bain (2008), on the other hand, promoted the disciplined based approach, which argues that each subject area, or discipline, is delineated by a unique set of perspectives, thoughts, and reactions. As such, history has a specific historian approach, while an economist or a psychologist would take on differentiated approaches. For Bain, the discipline of

history and that of historians required students to determine problems, work with evidence, and create evidence-based arguments in much the same manner as McCann's simulations.

For example, one assignment from the Native American reparations simulation required students to understand and evaluate the extent to which government abuse impacted Native tribes through a context geared toward philosophy, religion, morality, economics, and politics. Furthermore, in "Preparing to Enter a Different Environment" through the Elmtown simulation, educators were prompted to consider and encourage monetary translation and required students to understand "distance, time, travel, and communication" and that of disciplines such as mathematics, geography, and communication studies (McCann et al., 2015, p. 58). Even the excerpt above demonstrates one student wrestling and tying morality into her disciplined experience. Historians incorporate all of the above perspectives when addressing history, which in one sense coincides with McCann's assertion that simulations act as a discipline measure.

Upon further thought, however, one must ask whether history is the only discipline to incorporate such thoughts (e.g., philosophy, religion, morality, economics, politics, communication). History, for example, is not unique by including morality. Philosophy relies on morality to guide and foster the discipline's perspective. With this in mind, McCann's simulations and Bain's social studies education theory fall short, as history does not contain unique or non-universal approaches. Rather, simulations present students with the opportunity to blend and incorporate multiple disciplinary approaches.

Simulations, then, represent Barton and his critical, cross-disciplinary approach to social studies and/or history. Barton and Avery (2015) wrote, "History cannot be studied meaningfully without attention to geography

and economics; learning about government requires understanding the historical development of political institutions; and studying geography requires attention to cultural patterns and social relations (p. 2). In this context, history must address elements beyond its own discipline in order to develop a more complete and sophisticated understanding. Similarly, students in each simulation incorporated not just history approaches, but included those of philosophy, communication, and mathematics; as a result, these simulations reflect a curriculum aligned not with disciplinary thinking, as the title suggests, but rather with cross-disciplinary thinking. With this, McCann represents a critical, yet progressive approach to social studies education by incorporating multiple disciplinary inquiry and critical thought processes.

Reactions

One monumental aspect associated with research in terms of both literacy and history is the authors' desire and defense for young students' capabilities. The authors write, "We think we are realistic when we imagine that the students who had experienced the sequence of simulations described in the book might feel emboldened to contribute to adult conversations about the issues that divide political parties and regions of the country" (McCann et al., 2015, p. 105). In the evidence provided, students not only have the intellectual, cognitive, and developmental abilities to participate in some of the most controversial topics in American history, but these simulations also allow students to contribute to these conversations with confidence in their knowledge and perspective. I know this to be true, as I have had similar intellectual conversations with fourth and fifth grade students on issues related to race, slavery, war, and morality. As a fledgling historian and social studies educator, this is a

pedagogy I can endorse, regardless of its adherence to social studies education theory.

One component that also deserves recognition is the authors' link of simulation to that of games and play. The theoretical framework was based on Vygotsky, who noted an increase in children's cognitive behaviors while engaging in play. In the Elmtown simulation in particular, this emphasis of lived experience and by association, role-playing, immersed students by developing their characters. In fact, this is clearly shown by two students' intrinsic motivation to go beyond the assignment to create a political cartoon replicating 18th century propaganda and a miniature replica of a silver shop. At its heart, simulations develop an immersive nature that is simply not present in traditional approaches to social studies, among other subjects. Consequently, I liken this immersive nature to that of video games. As of late, Skyrim, Fallout, and Destiny have dominated console markets, in part due to the users' ability to create, interact, develop, and become characters within the game. Similarly, simulations provide elements of character role-playing that not only prove meaningful for video game immersion and success, but also for impactful learning.

With this in mind, simulations should garner strong support as an application for the classroom not due to its ability to bolster literacy practices, but rather, for promoting participatory democracy and citizenship. Within lower socioeconomic communities, this practice could incorporate students' lived experiences and could confront "social injustices that exist in our society" (Ross, 2000, p. 59). The Native American reparations simulation aligned most in driving toward the issues reflected on American society; as a direct result, the students demonstrated "reflection, analysis, skills building, and contributions to the community" through oral and written expression and the authors' hopes for continued participation (p. 59). These

overwhelmingly positive results should not be limited to history classrooms, however. Collaboration, communication, discussion, inquiry, and reading reside not only in simulations, but also in both academic and non-academic subjects. As such, it is my opinion that simulations could and should be transferred to any number of social studies, literature and language, science, and non-academic disciplines.

In closing, this research presented an intriguing perspective into understanding how the use of simulations and role-playing can garner such spectacular results. Despite some ambiguity in terms of whether these simulations were disciplined or cross-disciplined, the responses and oral discussions produced discernible elements of critical and abstract thinking. More importantly, in combination, the simulations delved into some of the most contentious issues in American history, and these sentiments can in no way be considered negative when it comes to student engagement and learning. In addition to presenting a historically faithful perspective, due consideration must be given from a literacy viewpoint. As such, McCann demonstrates a keen awareness to understanding literacy's complexity, and the subsequent responses, both written and oral, substantiate a resounding nod for simulation pedagogy in many aspects of literacy. However, continued research should look to understand more beneficial vocabulary instruction.

Andrea Tyler's book, *Cognitive Linguistics and Second Language Learning*, provides a clear introduction to theoretical basics of cognitive linguistics (CL) and the pedagogical application of CL to second language (L2) education. The book reflects the author's endeavor to bridge CL with L2 learning, presenting experimental evidence of the effectiveness of CL in English language instruction, and is partitioned into two parts.

Part 1, the first two chapters, comprising of the introduction of the foundations of CL tuned toward second language learning and teaching, entitled "The Basics of Cognitive Linguistics," is followed by Part 2, "Applying Cognitive Linguistics." The second half of this text consists of Chapters 3 to 7, with Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 discussing the application of CL to L2 learning and its pedagogical effectiveness, and Chapter 7 fomenting future directions of CL application and research.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the significance of the CL approach to language in contrast to traditional approaches. Tyler critiques the traditional view of language, which sees language as merely a set of rules that are context independent and are isolated from a cognitive process and conceptual system; from a traditional perspective, language involves many rules that are largely arbitrary and idiosyncratic. When it comes to language education, form is emphasized more so than underlying conceptual meaning, whereby learners need to rely heavily on memorizing many rules of exception. In contrast, a CL approach views language in a radically different way. It sees language as reflection of embodied meaning, which derives from our cognitive processes and our physical and socio-cultural interactions with the world. From a CL perspective, there are indispensable connections between the structure of language and the socio-physical environment in which we live, and the form of language is not constructed isolated from meaning. Briefly outlining a CL perspective on issues of L2 education, the author emphasizes the benefits and necessities of CL paradigms in L2 education.

Chapter 2 expands on the theoretical foundations of CL relevant to the discussion and analysis of language structures dealt with in the rest of the book. Tyler begins with emphasizing the central place of meaning in a CL approach to language, introducing the

concept of embodied meaning which arises from the ways we interact with the environment. According to this approach, being usage-based, language is always context dependent and thus a speaker's choice of particular linguistic form is largely determined by the context and the speaker's perception or conceptualization. For instance, the seemingly synonymous sentences "Jerry is sending George a sweater" and "Jerry is sending a sweater to George," in fact connote different perceptions of the same reality, with the emphasis on "George" in the former and on "sweater" in the latter.

Next, the author elaborates on the relationship between human language and cognition, introducing important CL tenets such as embodiment, metaphors, and categorization. Drawing on several examples, the chapter elaborates how language manifests our cognition and perceptual system which have been formed through our bodily experience. Aspects of first language learning are discussed from a CL perspective, followed by the discussion of the application of CL to L2 learning.

Chapter 3 reviews several studies that describe how the five CL tenets introduced in Chapter 2 – *construal*, *metaphor*, *categorization*, *embodiment*, and the *usage-based nature of language* – benefit and influence second language learning. Each tenet is briefly explicated again, followed by a number of studies illustrating each tenet. The studies suggest that the CL tenets provide a better account for many aspects of the target language and its patterns, and therefore allow L2 learners a deeper understanding of the language structures. Then, Tyler provides several studies on cross-linguistic influences and ends the chapter with discussing how a different conceptual system of L1 influences or interferes with L2 learning, and how CL can offer deeper insights into research on cross-linguistic influence.

In Chapters 4 to 6, Tyler focuses on the application of CL to three areas of English language learning, which have been recognized as some of the biggest challenges that English language learners face – *modals*, *prepositions*, and *sentence structure*. Each chapter involves CL-based linguistic analysis of modals, prepositions, and sentence structure respectively, followed by experimental evidence indicating the effectiveness of applied CL on these three notorious areas in L2 education.

The focus of Chapter 4 is on English modals. Pointing out the difficulty of their mastery, Tyler contrasts the CL-based account and traditional accounts of modal verbs (e.g., *can*, *could*, *will*, *shall*, and *might*). One reason for the difficulty mastering modals is that the precise definitions which capture the nuances of delicate modal meaning have been absent. Moreover, it is noted that almost every English modal possesses two basic meanings: one related to the socio-physical world of ability, obligation, or permission (e.g. The doctor said I *should* get more sleep), and the other related to a speaker's mental reasoning and logical prediction (e.g. [Doorbell rings] Speaker: That *should* be Catherine now). Unfortunately, the traditional account fails to address or explain any systemic relationships between the two basic meanings. On the other hand, the CL alternative, based on the notions of force dynamics and metaphorical extension, offers not only precise definitions for the individual modals, but also a systematic explanation of how the two meanings are related. This systemic explication will prevent learners from simply memorizing superficial meanings and linguistic forms of modals; instead it will offer a conceptual understanding of modals, which will consequently help L2 learners make productive use of modals. Lastly, Tyler introduces three experiments that delve into the effectiveness of the CL approach to modals in L2 learning, studies concluding that those participants who received CL-based instruction significantly outperformed the

control group by improving their understanding and use of modals.

Chapter 5 addresses English prepositions. Tyler starts with briefly elucidating the reasons learning prepositions is challenging. The first reason is that it is hard to characterize the semantics of prepositions, and the second is that one preposition has diverse extended meanings which may seem largely arbitrary. It is criticized that traditional linguists tend to present diverse senses associated with a preposition as idiosyncratic, suggesting memorization of every individual idiosyncratic sense as a pedagogical treatment for prepositions. In contrast, CL has a polysemy approach, which argues that those seemingly-idiosyncratic senses are in fact not idiosyncratic but are closely related to each other in systematic and motivated ways.

For example, the preposition *to* in the sentence "Sofie worked *to* the limits of her abilities" and *to* in "Harry ran *to* home base" are not independent separate words; instead, the two uses are in fact closely related to each other in a motivated way. The author notes that diverse figurative senses extends from the central spatial meaning of a preposition, based on the general cognitive principles, such as real-world force dynamics, different construals, and metaphorical thinking and experiential correlation. Next, she shows polysemy networks of the semantics of the three prepositions *to*, *for*, and *at*, detailing how each figurative sense extends from a central sense in a motivated way. The systemic account of seemingly-arbitrary senses of a preposition will significantly help L2 learners internalize its conceptual meanings and how those diverse meanings are polysemously connected, without having to memorize every individual meaning (or use) of it. This is confirmed through two complementary research studies that test the utility of CL-based instruction of the three prepositions. The results indicate that participants receiving CL-based instruction

significantly improved their ability to accurately understand the meanings of the targeted prepositions.

The topic of Chapter 6 is sentence structure with a focus on dative alternation. Similar to the two previous chapters, Tyler begins with discussing the difficulty of mastering the relationship between verbs and the sentence structures in which they are realized. Different patterns of verbal argument structures make it more difficult for learners to learn sentence structures: some verbs are followed by one noun (e.g. *kick* or *eat*), some by two nouns (e.g. *give* or *send*), and some verbs are followed by none (e.g. *occur* or *sneeze*). Moreover, some verbs can be used in two patterns of argumentative structure.

For example, consider the two sentences "John *gave* a plate to Edie" and "John *gave* Edie a plate." Traditional account of these two syntax forms is that they are synonymous, and that the pattern "V NP to NP" is the basic pattern. In contrast, a CL account has a different perspective toward this phenomenon, arguing that the structure of the sentence itself is meaningful by embodying different construals on reality. That is, they are not synonymous because they in fact differ pragmatically and conceptually. It is argued that a CL approach can provide a systematic and deeper explanation of the difference embedded in the two syntactic constructions. The pedagogical implication is that instead of understanding "V NP1 to NP2" and "V NP2 NP1" as synonymous, learners need to accurately conceive that they actually represent two different perceptions; they are not the same. In this way, learners will be able to make productive use of different sentence structures correctly with the "true" understanding of the linguistic structures with regard to the meanings manifested in them; learners are not merely memorizing alternative forms of the same thing. Two research studies are introduced as evidence of the efficacy of CL approach in L2 education. The results from

both studies indicate that participants receiving CL-based instruction performed much better on both comprehension and production tasks.

The last chapter offers a brief summary of the main points discussed in the book. In this chapter, Tyler reemphasizes the CL's key tenet, embodied meaning, and its implications for effective L2 instruction. The author points out that a CL approach offers a different paradigm of conceptualizing the nature of language from more traditional understandings which fail to account for the conceptual meanings behind its form. The chapter also introduces an additional tenet of CL as an additional remark on research and application, and the book ends with suggesting the importance of having an appropriate understanding of language in context of L2 pedagogy and research.

In this book, Tyler introduces fundamental tenets of CL and bridges them to L2 education. I believe this book would provide new insight for both L2 teachers and learners who have dealt with language as a set of rules that simply need to be memorized; CL offers a new paradigm for understanding and learning a language. The author's illustration of claims is supported by diverse examples and previous studies, which make her points less abstruse. Particularly, it is beneficial that the application section deals with the grammatical elements that L2 learners typically find challenging. She also suggests future directions for CL research and pedagogy, which I think will be helpful for potential CL researchers.

Nonetheless, there are a few areas of need. The polysemy network models of the prepositions *to*, *for* and *at* in Chapter 5, seem to be insufficiently thorough because I believe there are other senses that the models fails to explain clearly. For example, *to* in the sentence "She jumped *to* her feet" does not seem to fit any of the senses in her model. Moreover, her analysis of the figurative meaning extensions might not be equally effective for every ESL learner.

From a Korean-L1 perspective, for instance, the "attachment" sense (e.g. Danny nailed the board *to* the fence) in the polysemy model of *to* may be closer to the central sense than the "limit" sense (e.g. Sofie worked *to* the limits of her abilities). Therefore, sticking to her model in L2 education might result in forcing learners to follow a particular way of thinking when there is a more convincing way of conceptualizing the polysemy network with regard to their L1 background.

In addition, I think it is important to note the long-term effects of CL-based pedagogy. Is the effect fleeting or permanent? Another issue I found is that most examples are based on the English language, so the value of CL on other L2 learning seems to require more empirical studies with other languages, and in this regard its inherent efficacy still remains questionable. It is possible that the pedagogical effectiveness of CL may not be equally effective with different languages. Lastly, there are many other linguistic aspects for L2 learners to learn, like for example, the accurate use of English articles or plural/singular forms. It might have been better if the book had addressed a broader range of the application of CL to L2 pedagogy.

Despite a few limitations, overall the book is a good resource for people in the field of second language acquisition and education. It clearly demonstrates the fundamental connection between linguistic structures and underlying meanings, which is argued to be inseparable. Although it includes some technical terms, the concepts are illustrated in accessible language. The book is academic but does not require an advanced linguistics background to read; nonetheless, one or two courses in linguistics would be helpful in better understanding the content in that it offers contrasts between the traditional approach of understanding language and acquisition, and the CL approach. I believe this work can be utilized as

a textbook in both undergraduate and graduate courses, such as *second language learning* and *language and cognition.*

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