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# Learning: A Process of Enculturation into the Community's Practices

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## **Learning: A Process of Enculturation into the Community's Practices**

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**Ailing Kong**

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*Editors' note: The authors gave the following talk at the 2004 NCTE Annual Convention in Indianapolis upon receiving the Alan C. Purves Award, presented to the RTE article from the previous volume year judged most likely to have an impact on classroom practice ("The Road to Participation: The Construction of a Literacy Practice in a Learning Community of Linguistically Diverse Learners," v. 38, pp. 85-124). Recounting her own journey toward participation in the community of literacy researchers, lead author Ailing Kong describes how her research interests developed along with a growing sense of membership fostered by caring and challenging teachers. Writing as both dissertation co-chair and co-author, P. David Pearson recalls his role in the collaborative community of mentors who supported Ailing as she formulated a research agenda and completed the doctoral dissertation that led to their award-winning article. The authors conclude with a reflection on the current policy climate, arguing the need for research and practice informed by attention to a full spectrum of literate opportunities and finely attuned to diverse learners' needs.*

### **Ailing's Story**

I feel honored to accept the Alan C. Purves Award, and I am very grateful to all who have supported me in this work. I hope to use this occasion to reflect upon the journey that led to the conception and publication of our article. Not surprisingly, I see parallels between the road Ellen's students took in their "learning to Book-Club" and the road I took in learning to research. Both cases demonstrate that learning is a process of guided participation in cultural practices, with support from more knowledgeable members of the community. During this process, learners develop their participatory knowledge and skills and grow to be constructive members of the community (Vygotsky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

When I started my journey towards becoming a researcher a little more than a decade ago, I had taught English as a foreign language in China for 12 years, working with students at the elementary, secondary, and college levels. I had spent hours drilling my students on sentence patterns, requiring them to memorize sentences and sometimes complete dialogues. I was teaching them the way I had been taught, even though I didn't like it. I wondered if there were better and more efficient ways to teach English. I then enrolled in the doctoral program in educational psychology at Michigan State University, where I hoped to learn the scientific explanation of how the human brain works and how learning occurs. I expected to be handed a magic wand that I could circle around the heads of my students and say, "there, you've learned." Instead, I was expected to design and conduct research, to make new knowledge myself.

I remember how surprised I was at my first meeting with my advisor, Jim Gavelek, when he asked me about my research interests. No one had ever asked me that question before, nor had I ever thought about doing research. Like the students in Ellen's classroom, I was a novice in this new community, and my road to participation started with immersion in the practice. I took different courses, participated in lectures, discussion groups, research projects, and various cultural events, as well as engaging in conversations with faculty members and fellow students on issues related to learning, teaching, and schools. Jim, who advised me in the initial four years of my doctoral study, was always very generous with his time, engaging me in intellectual conversations and listening to my half-baked ideas. Supported by a guidance committee that he chaired, I conducted a practicum study on the strategies used by Chinese adults in reading English and Chinese texts. The paper was presented at AERA, my first formal conference presentation. MSU's College of Education Graduate Student Association organized an opportunity for me and other first time conference presenters to give mock presentations, and I invited David to be my discussant. He not only gave me feedback on the content of the paper, but also made suggestions on how I should present it.

Another important experience that helped prepare me for my dissertation study was my participation in a research project led by Professor Carol Sue Englert. The project investigated effective literacy instructional practices for teaching students with special needs. Working with Carol Sue and other members of the research team, I had the opportunity to learn, practice, and develop a set of research skills that I would apply to my dissertation study. I observed classrooms, interviewed teachers, tested students, videotaped students' literacy-learning activities, transcribed their conversations, and analyzed the data for patterns. I also participated in generating research questions, developing rubrics for assessing students' writing, and preparing conference proposals. All these activities helped me cast the theories and intellectual conversations I had encountered in various other contexts in concrete forms. It was through these experiences that I found my dis-

sertation focus. I wanted to examine the literacy-learning experiences of students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and to explore whether their participation in literacy activities would help cultivate a classroom learning community. This led me to Ellen, who surprised me with her Book-Club curriculum.

As my academic advisor and dissertation director, David facilitated me through the approval of my dissertation proposal, and, later, along with Chris Clark, co-directed the committee that guided me through the maze of the dissertation endeavor: data collection, data analysis, and writing up my findings. During this time, I met with David and Chris on a regular basis to discuss the sense I was making of my data, as well as my surprises, frustrations, questions, and confusions. We also exchanged e-mails frequently between meetings. It was through these conversations that I was able to overcome my frustration in not finding the consistently democratic classroom I had expected; gradually, I came to notice that Ellen's explicit and implicit scaffolding allowed her gradually to transfer her responsibility to her students as they developed their literacy knowledge and skills in conducting their book discussions.

As mentors, David and Chris were always there to support me. As a novice and an international student lacking much of the cultural capital of the community, their confirmation and advice were invaluable to me. Their immediate responses to my questions or requests also made me feel that I was valued and that they cared about my making progress. To make sure that I met the deadline and had a successful defense, David and I went through the complete final version of my dissertation on a Saturday afternoon. Knowing that David and Chris were there to help me succeed inspired my sustained effort always to try my best.

The award-winning paper that David and I wrote came from my dissertation study. We were excited to see the changes in how Ellen's diverse students learned to "Book-Club," and we wanted to share the story with others. As soon as I completed the dissertation, David encouraged me to write up the study and to apply for IRA's Outstanding Dissertation Award. After that, we sat down together and went through the manuscript line by line. David would stop to explain why he thought certain changes were needed, from elaborating on ideas to using graphics to correcting grammatical errors and changing word choices. This gave me the opportunity to witness how he, a veteran researcher and writer, worked on revising and editing a paper. We later discussed the revisions, mainly through e-mail and sometimes by phone. We would send each other our revised drafts with all changes tracked. I remember looking forward to receiving his revised version, and each time I would carefully read the changes he made and study how his changes made the ideas more concise and connected, and how the language of the text came to flow. Through the exchange of the revision drafts, I learned immensely from David. I also felt validated and encouraged because he always affirmed my thoughts while helping to improve them.

With multiple revisions, it took us two-and-a-half years to get this paper in print. I remember thinking to myself after each revision, “This is it!”—but it was not. Reflecting upon how she guided her students to “Book Club,” Ellen commented, “persistence worked.” Persistence worked for me in writing this award-winning paper, too. However, without David’s support, I might have lost that persistence. I remember how he kindly reminded me of the approaching deadlines when he didn’t hear from me.

I feel very lucky: Not every mentor is like David, and not every mentee has the opportunity to write a paper along with a mentor. David’s mentoring, however, did not stop in the publication of this article. When I saw him recently at the AERA Annual Meeting, he asked me “How is your writing going?”—also adding, “If there is anything you want me to have a look at, send it to me.” Knowing how busy he is, that was enough to inspire me to continue trying my best in my own research and teaching.

Similar to the road taken by the students in Ellen’s classroom, I developed my knowledge and skills to participate in the educational research community with guidance and support from the more knowledgeable members while participating in their communal practices. As a mentor, David played the role of “a teacher, a role model, an approachable counselor, a trusted advisor, a challenger, [and] an encourager” (Carruthers, 1993, p. 9). To him, as well as to all others who have guided me into the educational research community, I am forever grateful.

### **David’s Story**

Ailing talked a lot about the mentoring relationship that she and I participated in, along with Jim Gavelek and Chris Clark, as she completed her doctoral studies at Michigan State. One of the conclusions one might draw about her experience there, and it would be an accurate one, is that at MSU, a student can have many mentors—each contributing something slightly different to one’s professional growth. Jim was certainly the one who started Ailing along the pathway to the cultural-psychological perspectives that would steer her to Vygotsky, Rogoff, Lave, and others who would shape her views of learning and language in ways that would naturally lead to the sort of work she did in her dissertation. And Chris Clark was an indispensable part of the triad he, Ailing, and I developed during the year in which she conceptualized the problem, carried out the study, analyzed the data, and began writing her thesis. I am absolutely convinced that the three of us developed a codependence that we all looked forward to enacting each month. Becky Packard, a peer of Ailing’s in the program at MSU, has developed a concept of a “composite mentor” in her work on understanding the development of professional growth among young women in the sciences. The idea is that no one person can serve all of the mentoring needs an individual brings to his or her

career, especially in the initial stages. Hence what a young scholar needs is a composite mentor—just the right bits and pieces, so to speak, of several different senior colleagues—to meet the range of needs he or she possesses. If this view of mentoring is accurate, then many of us senior colleagues, along with our junior colleagues, need to cast aside the more traditional view of mentoring as a privileged relationship between a senior and a junior colleague in favor of this distributed view. As for me, I can attest to its reality, validity, and effectiveness—for I have seen it work in many cases other than Ailing's, although I must admit that it worked exceptionally well in her case.

From my perspective, I could not be more thrilled to win this award in concert with my colleague, Ailing Kong—and for three related but distinct reasons. First, because I share it with a colleague and a former student. I believe in collaboration at every level within our educational system—mainly because I see so much that goes wrong when we try to go it alone. I don't know about the rest of you, but I can assure you that my teaching, research, and writing are all better when I do it with colleagues than when I do it on my own. And the sharing with a former student—I've already said how much that means to me and why, but there is an added measure of meaningfulness to the award because it also means so much to Ailing.

Second, because it is the Alan Purves Award. Alan and I were colleagues at Illinois for a decade, give or take a year or two. And he was a singular force in the College of Education, at University High School, and in our informal seminars at the Center for the Study of Reading. He never lacked for an opinion—and an argument to back it up—on matters of research, scholarly writing, or the academic enterprise. Alan was thoughtful, clever, and caring. His thoughtfulness was revealed in the care he took in his own scholarship—both on response to literature and composition—and in the work he did for the field, in bringing *Research in Teaching English* to fruition, in nurturing it in its infancy, in building structures and activities to ensure a voice for research within NCTE. Alan was nothing if not clever in his approach to problem solving, and it didn't much matter where the problem came from—a colleague (like myself) who had hit a snag in his research design, a student who had lost her way in a forest of data analysis, a group of colleagues (like you here today) struggling for a voice in their professional lives. Most of us would have felt good about coming up with one solution to any of these problems; Alan would come up with three in the same time frame, and two would have been outside the proverbial box. His caring is revealed in the legacy of scholarship he left with all of those who worked closely with him, as students, colleagues, and both. They knew he did what he did because he cared so deeply about making sure that our field worried about both intellectual and moral integrity—both its mind and its soul. My memory of Alan makes receiving this award all the more meaningful.

Third, because of the purpose of the award—to honor research that is likely to impact practice. Early in my career, I worried mostly about doing work that was both clever and theoretically grounded—designing materials that forced a variable, such as grammatical complexity, to the surface of a task, or creating an intervention that allowed a teacher to instantiate schema theory in her instruction. But lately, perhaps because of age and the ever-increasing sense of one's mortality, I worry about impact, about improving the quality of life in our schools for both students and teachers or, even more important, living up to our rhetoric about equity and diversity.

For this trio of reasons, then, I add my expression of gratitude to Ailing's. We are thrilled to accept the Alan Purves Award.

### **Our Story**

Having spoken individually, we cannot resist the temptation to respond collectively to an issue that plagues us both on an almost daily basis—the erosion of teacher prerogative in the current policy context. We were able to conduct this study in Ellen's classroom only because Ellen had the option of teaching reading through the medium of Book Club. And she had that option because (a) she assumed that it was her responsibility to provide her students with a rich and challenging curriculum of her own making or choosing, and (b) she worked with a principal who expected her to do nothing less than that. She was surely accountable, as all teachers are, for her students' achievement in general and performance on specific indicators such as the Michigan Educational Assessment Program. But she knew that she had many degrees of freedom in helping students achieve the standards expected of them and her.

In many places in America, teachers do not have the same level of professional prerogative that enabled Ellen to implement Book Club in this multilingual, multicultural classroom. In the name of Scientifically Based Reading Research, mandates have dictated not only the outcomes that teachers and their students must achieve but also the methods, procedures, and approaches they must use to meet those performance standards. In short, both the ends (the outcomes) and the means (the methods) of instruction are fixed by external authority, leaving individual teachers and school staffs with few choices to make.

This state of affairs is unfortunate on several counts. First, it assumes that our knowledge base is sufficiently rich and secure to specify what is best for all students and all teachers in all schools. Would that we knew so much—and with such a degree of confidence! Second, it assumes that some forms of knowledge are better than others. Even though there is substantial knowledge to suggest that early attention to the code and to the literal aspects of comprehension is important, there is also a rich and rigorous knowledge base directing us to challenge students with good literature, interpretive tasks, and collaborative reasoning (see, for ex-

ample, Marshall, 2000). Third, it assumes that the only goal in education, or at least the most important goal, is achieving standards that can be measured by standardized tests. We don't object to standardized tests as *one* of many components in a school's portfolio of performance measures; however, we have yet to find a standardized test that can assess the standards—and outcomes—of participation, independence, motivation, and response to the big ideas of literature. These were additional standards that the students in Ellen's class were able to achieve. Where will we find the tools—and the courage—to hold ourselves accountable to these standards?

We have come to expect life to be filled with many ironies, but when those ironies limit teachers' capacity to do their job in meeting the instructional needs of the wide array of students who cross the doorstep to their classrooms, it is time to respond. The current situation calls for a response that is grounded in our broadest and richest scholarship and driven by our moral conviction that teachers, and their students, need access to the full range of options that our scholarship can provide.

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