

## Positioning students as readers and writers through talk in a high school English classroom

By: [Amy Vetter](#)

Vetter, A. (2010). Positioning students as readers and writers through talk in a high school English classroom. *English Education*, 43(1), 33-64.

Made available courtesy of the National Council of Teachers of English:

<https://library.ncte.org/journals/ee/issues/v43-1>

\*\*\*© 2010 National Council of Teachers of English. Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from NCTE. \*\*\*

### Abstract:

This 5-month qualitative study investigates how one high school English teacher situated students as readers and writers within daily, spontaneous classroom interactions. Specifically, the author draws on positioning theory (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999) as a lens to analyze how the teacher navigated improvised responses during three separate literacy events to position students as engaged readers, capable writers, and members of a writing community. This approach construes that literacy learning is an identity process in which language is a powerful medium. Results from the study suggest that teachers must be sophisticated navigators of improvised interactions to facilitate the process of literacy learning. Vetter offers suggestions to teacher educators about how to implement critical analysis of classroom interactions and improvised responses to improve literacy instruction.

**Keywords:** English education | literacy instruction | teacher education | identity

### Article:

\*\*\*Note: Full text of article below

# Positioning Students as Readers and Writers through Talk in a High School English Classroom

Amy Vetter

This 5-month qualitative study investigates how one high school English teacher situated students as readers and writers within daily, spontaneous classroom interactions. Specifically, I draw on positioning theory (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999) as a lens to analyze how the teacher navigated improvised responses during three separate literacy events to position students as engaged readers, capable writers, and members of a writing community. This approach construes that literacy learning is an identity process in which language is a powerful medium. Results from the study suggest that teachers must be sophisticated navigators of improvised interactions to facilitate the process of literacy learning. I offer suggestions to teacher educators about how to implement critical analysis of classroom interactions and improvised responses to improve literacy instruction.

**I**n Gina's 11th-grade English classroom students chattered about the weekend or rested their heads on desks in resistance to writing a reflective essay modeled after National Public Radio's *This I Believe* essays. In an attempt to engage students in the writing assignment, Gina (all names are pseudonyms) walked up to her stool in the front of the room and informally asked students about what it meant to be a writer.

**GINA:** Let's have this conversation . . . about whether you were born a good writer or not. What do you think?

**CAROLE:** Some people are and some people aren't. Some people have to learn how to do it.

**STACEY:** No, I believe that everyone can write reflectively about something . . .

**GINA:** How do you become a good writer?

**SHANE:** Practice.

**GINA:** OK, practice, how else?

**DARYL:** Read a lot.

**CAROLE:** I read a lot and I ain't no good writer.

**STACEY:** That's because you be reading junk.

**CAROLE:** I read *People*.

**GINA:** You have to read not only as a reader, but as a writer . . . So, when you notice something that you read that you like, you should try to mock that, imitate that in your own writing.

After several more minutes of this conversation, students started drafting reflections from a former brainstorming activity. A few weeks later, and after several similar conversations about writing, students completed polished pieces of reflective essays that discussed a range of beliefs about love, teenage pregnancy, and addiction.

As I (a teacher educator and researcher) observed this conversation and others like it over a 5-month period, I recognized some interesting patterns of classroom interaction that frequently occurred in Gina's classroom. This conversation demonstrated how Gina routinely navigated classroom interactions to position students as readers and writers through talk such as open-ended questions and explicit statements about how to become readers/writers ("practice, read a lot"). Specifically, Gina opened this conversation on the spur of the moment as a response to students' disengagement, shifting away from her planned lesson of reading example *This I Believe* essays. By discontinuing what was not working and by asking students about their opinions on writing, Gina opened a space for conversation about how to construct a writer identity. Her open-ended questions positioned, or situated, students as writers by challenging them to define what it meant to be a writer and describe how to become a writer. She implied that students were capable of being writers and that they had something worthy to say about the craft of writing. Several students took up those positions by responding to the conversation about specific ways to construct a writer identity ("practice, read a lot"), and they continued this positioning as they constructed their reflective essays over the following 2 weeks.

Several educators have highlighted the complexity of classroom interactions and the need to examine how interactions shape literacy learning (Cazden, 2001; Gee, 1999; Rex & Schiller, 2009). Cazden (2001) stated that interactions between students and teachers are similar to "a group of musi-

cians improvising together” (p. 40). All members enter the classroom with different views about how the “performance should be performed” and even though the teacher is the stage director and chief actor, the performance does not come together without the individual and collective performances of students (p. 40). Because classroom interactions are mediated by language and “packed with ideology,” teachers must have the ability to navigate spontaneous social interactions with sophistication to guide learners into membership of the classroom community, especially students on the margins (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 128). This is a difficult theory to put into practice. Classroom interactions have powerful implications for how students position themselves as readers and writers; teachers must find ways to navigate those interactions in ways that invite students into the classroom community while at the same time meet objectives for the day (Britzman, 2003).

After observing Gina, I wanted to know more about how she navigated responses at just the right moment to situate students as readers and writers. As a teacher educator, I hoped to learn more about how teachers talk, react, and create responses that best fit the localized events of the classroom and its participants to share this information with future teachers. Linked to navigating responses is the concept of improvisation, sometimes misunderstood as the creative process of teaching without any preparation or set text to follow. In contrast, Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte, and Cain (1998) define improvisation as the “arrangement of identifiable social discourses/practices that are one’s resources (which Bakhtin glossed as “voices”) to craft a response in a time and space defined by others’ standpoints in activity, that is, in a social field conceived as the ground of responsiveness” (p. 272). From this perspective, improvisation, in which a person strategically uses the cultural resources at hand to devise a new action or response to a specific situation, is an important part of positioning students as readers and writers and facilitating identity work in a classroom. For Gina, such improvisations entailed routines and practices during unexpected moments of interaction. She used what resources she had from her personal and professional world in unexpected and unplanned ways to position her students as readers and writers. In the above excerpt, we see Gina recognize students’ disengagement and unexpectedly “craft” open-ended questions to her students about writing. I argue that it is within these sophisticated navigations of unexpected interactions that teachers facilitate the construction of literacy identities in a high school English classroom. Teachers would benefit from critically examining such navigations to better understand how language shapes students’ learning experiences (Rex & Schiller, 2009). To explore this topic further, this study examined the following question: How does

one high school English teacher navigate classroom interactions in order to situate students as readers and writers? Specifically, I use three detailed and contextualized portraits to illustrate how Gina positioned students as engaged readers, capable writers, and members of a writing community during spontaneous interactions.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The examination of how Gina navigated classroom interactions is central to learning for three reasons: First, classroom discourse is the medium by which most teaching and learning occurs (Cazden, 2001; Mercer, 2000).

### **How does one high school English teacher navigate classroom interactions in order to situate students as readers and writers?**

Second, teachers are responsible for navigating talk, both positively and negatively, to “enhance the purposes of education” (Cazden, 2001, p. 2; see also Applebee, 1996; Erickson, 2004). Third, classroom interactions play a large part in how students fashion themselves as readers and writers within a classroom (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2005; Rex, 2006). Two interrelated theoretical frameworks, learning as an identity process and positioning theory, are used to illustrate the implications of Gina’s interactional responses that position students as readers/writers, especially with learners who were disengaged and resistant. First, I discuss learning as an identity process to illustrate that learning literacy is not just about learning a set of skills and strategies but is also about acquiring behaviors and discourses associated with reading and writing identities. Second, I use positioning theory to provide a specific lens for examining how teachers and students enact and negotiate their identities. In particular, positioning theory highlights how Gina used language to position students as readers/writers to facilitate the construction of literacy identities and literacy learning in general.

## **Learning as an Identity Process**

Grounded in sociocultural theory, concepts of learning as an identity process illustrate how language and literacy are socially, historically, and culturally constructed (Street, 1993; Wells, 2001). In other words, students acquire knowledge about what it means to be a reader or writer through interactions within social, cultural, and historical contexts (Bruner, 1975; Wertsch, 1991). This means that learning is “not just an accumulation of skills and information, but also a process of becoming” (Wenger, 1998, p. 215). By process of becoming, Wenger (1998) means that learning how to read and write, for

example, is a social process that involves taking on behaviors, discourses, gestures, dress, etc. that are associated with readers/writers. When a person constructs an identity, they do so by taking on these discourses and behaviors. Identities, then, are “self-understandings” or the ways in which people “tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 3). Gina recognized that students’ identities (i.e., gender, race, class, sexuality) shape how they situate themselves as literacy students. She also understood that their engagement in literacy practices (i.e., what they read, how they read) shaped how they constructed and enacted identities (Finders, 1997; McCarthey & Moje, 2002). For Gina, recognizing students’ identities and knowing how to respond to those identities in ways that facilitated rather than impeded the construction of literacy identities was central to her teaching philosophy.

The concept of learning as an identity process has been used to understand how students in school either negotiate cultural norms and discourses within a school community or become alienated from those norms (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Wenger (1998) used the concept of community of practice to describe a community in which newcomers enter and attempt to acquire the sociocultural practices and discourses of the community. These communities of practice (i.e., classroom, playground) can be viewed as a home for identity construction. Learning involves membership in the various communities of practice found in school, but membership can be difficult at times because of the alienating nature of the institution (i.e., curriculum, discipline). Students are required to understand the behaviors and discourses associated with membership into a literacy community. To this end, teacher support and guidance, particularly in spontaneous interactions, of that membership is key to position students as readers and writers. Although Gina could not control everything that shaped how her students constructed their reader/writer identities, she attempted to facilitate membership into literacy communities through talk that positioned students as engaged, active, and valued readers and writers.

## Positioning Theory

Positioning theory is especially helpful in examining how learning is an identity process, because it can be used to investigate how students construct and enact literacy identities and how teachers might facilitate those constructions and enactments. The concept of positioning illustrates that people position or arrange themselves and others along storylines or narratives, related to both past experiences and cultural ideologies (Holland et al., 1998;

van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Within this theory students are viewed as agent, author, actor, and audience recruited into frameworks of meaning. Students reconstruct those frameworks of meaning to become participants of a classroom (Fairbanks & Arial, 2006; van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). People negotiate meanings about themselves and social worlds by strategically positioning themselves through dialogue. For example, Gina's students entered her classroom with a storyline of what it meant to be a reader/writer and positioned themselves, through verbal and nonverbal language, in that way to negotiate the parameters of membership. During such events, a person can position himself or herself (reflexive positioning) or be positioned by others (interactive positioning; Davies & Harré, 1990; van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). These positions are related to issues of power and entitlement, and they depend on the people and context surrounding that person. Different people understand storylines differently because people rely on divergent cultural resources to make sense of events in a narrative.

Several studies have focused on how students position themselves and each other within schools (Clarke, 2006; Leander, 2002; Yoon, 2008), but few have focused specifically on how teachers position students during classroom interactions. Rex (2006) examined how teachers and students from differing backgrounds positioned each other during classroom interactions and how those positionings shaped conflicts specifically related to race. She found that teachers' responses to students were bound in both professional and personal self-interests that sometimes competed with purposes for building relationships, constructing identities, and making sense of subject matter. Johnston (2004) argues that teachers in his study chose words, such as "I notice," "we," or "that's not like you," that nudged students toward the process of becoming readers and writers. Such words, he commented, are tools for shaping participation in the classroom and provide students with a sense of responsibility and a sense of agency (Johnston, 2004; Wenger, 1998). Wortham (2003) illustrated how Tyisha's identity as disruptive outcast solidified through positionings by the teacher and classmates. Although Tyisha was initially engaged in discussions, because she did not fit into the "good student" identity the teacher expected (i.e., disagreed with teacher, talked off-topic), the teacher positioned her as an outcast during classroom discussions, later silencing her. Reeves (2009) found that teachers can intentionally or unintentionally position students in positive or negative ways through teaching. Specifically, teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and discourses about English Language Learners shaped identity positions of learners and their membership in the classroom community.

The ways that teachers position students as readers and writers over time contribute to how students fashion their literacy identities and become members of the classroom community. The position a teacher claims for himself or herself and assigns to others holds important implications for teachers' practice (e.g., what they can and ought to do in class) and also their students' access to identities (e.g., capable learner; Reeves, 2009). A caring teacher might use encouraging words to position students as valued members of the classroom while others might use public humiliation as a disciplinary technique, resulting in the alienation of students (Reeves, 2009).

The purpose of this study is to add to scholarship about the relationship among positioning, identity, and learning by illustrating how Gina navigated responses during classroom interactions to position students as readers and writers. I chose to highlight episodes in which Gina and students reached successful positionings to provide snapshots of classroom interactions that work in positive ways to affect student's membership in literacy classrooms, specifically with disengaged and struggling students, in hopes that those portraits will be informative for others. Perhaps these snapshots will open dialogue about the complexity of classroom interactions, provide a broader picture of literacy learning as an identity process, and offer insight to future and current teachers about how to navigate complex classroom interactions that facilitate the construction of literacy identities.

It is important to note that when I say Gina *positioned* a student, I am not implying that the positioning of students as readers and writers is a linear event that occurs from teacher to student. Instead, guiding students through the process of becoming a successful literacy student is an interactive, fluid, ever-evolving event in which both students and teacher are in constant negotiation. For this paper, a more in-depth examination of the teacher's interactive and reflexive positionings is provided to better understand the part she played in co-constructing students' literacy identities.

## Method

This study used a micro-ethnographic approach that focused on how people act and react to each other within classroom language and literacy events (Bloome et al., 2005) to explore the following question: In what ways did one high school English teacher negotiate classroom interactions that positioned students as readers and writers? Specifically, discourse analysis framed around positioning theory was used to interpret classroom interactions. Such a lens provided insights into how Gina used language to position students as readers and writers in the classroom. Furthermore, I examined how Gina



positioned herself (reflexive positionings) and her students (interactive positionings) during three episodes in which students shifted from disengaged and reluctant to engaged readers, capable writers, and members of a writer community (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). I highlight how this teacher promoted literacy instruction through responses during unplanned classroom interactions.

## Context

**School.** This research project was conducted at Rushmore High School, a 9–12 school located in a working-class neighborhood of a southwestern city in the United States. The school sits on the east side of the city, the most culturally and ethnically diverse section of town. At the time of the study, the school's population was 67 percent Latino/Latina, 30 percent African American, 2 percent white, and 1 percent Asian and Native American. Eighty-one percent of the students were labeled economically disadvantaged. Thirty-one percent of the population entered school speaking English as a second language. The school has been rated academically unacceptable based on state assessment results on math, science, social studies, and language arts and school completion rates for grades 9 through 12 since 2005. In 2006, 73 percent of students passed the English/Language Arts portion of the state assessment in 11th grade (42 percent science, 48 percent math, and 76 percent social studies).

**Students.** The 25 students (13 female and 12 male) in this 50-minute on-level English III course represented a range of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds (16 Latino/Latina and 9 African American). Eight students spoke English as a second language, and three received special education services. Students in the classroom came from a variety of backgrounds and brought with them divergent needs and interests. For example, Sam and Raul were repeating 11th-grade English, Lucy and Omar struggled to refine English as a second language, June regularly resisted engagement in reading/writing, and Freddy and Detrek competed daily for the spotlight as classroom comedian.

**Teacher.** I spent several months working with the teacher, Gina. A colleague first introduced us during her National Writing Project Teacher Research Group in 2006. In this initial meeting, Gina and I discovered that we both cared about the development of students as lifelong readers and writers. We felt it was important for teachers to provide spaces for students to make sense out of themselves and the world around them through reading and writing, especially in urban schools under the strict mandates of

high-stakes testing. Following our conversations, she invited me to observe a few of her classes. After these observations and talking with the students, Gina and I decided that her seventh-period class would be a good fit because of the students' interest and willingness to be involved in the study. I give a detailed description of Gina in the findings section to provide context related to how she positioned herself as a teacher during the classroom interactions described below.

## Data Collection

This study used micro-ethnographic methods of data collection to explore the interactional practices of a high school classroom through extended, in-depth participant-observations and theoretically informed interpretations of those observations (Corsaro, 1981; Miles & Huberman, 1994). I collected data as a participant-observer for a period of 5 months. Data sources included expanded field notes, videotape and audiotape of classroom interactions, and interviews with the teacher and students. Observations (approximately 75) ranged from three to five days weekly (for one 50-minute period class), which I noted in thick description on a weekly basis. I audiotaped and videotaped 63 classes. Audio recording began in early February to ease participants into the taping process. I began videotaping in late February and transcribed and analyzed pertinent episodes in those recordings. The camera was set on a tripod to film the entire class. When students formed groups, I placed audio recorders on tables to hear student interactions (all students and their parents/guardians agreed to allow video and audio taping for the study). Since classroom interactions were my main focus, field notes focused on how Gina orchestrated those interactions to position students as readers/writers. For example, notes focused on the types of language that Gina used, such as open-ended questions, collective pronouns, or elicitations that invited students into the literacy event. Notes also concentrated on how students took up or resisted Gina's positionings to better understand how Gina's use of language affected students' literacy learning.

I formally interviewed (all audiotaped) Gina three times (beginning, middle, and end) throughout the 5 months. In all interviews, I asked her about pedagogical strategies and theories, curriculum design, relationships with students, and her thoughts on students' participation and engagement in the classroom. During the second and third interviews we talked about interpretations of the data collected so far, including a few potential patterns found through initial analysis. In the final interview, we addressed a summary of data analysis from written analytic memos and her overall

experience as a participant in this research study. These interviews started with open-ended questions, which evolved into conversations because of our mutual interests in education. In addition, multiple informal interviews/conversations occurred throughout the data collection period with the teacher, which were recorded in field notes.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis began by generating common patterns and themes across student and teacher interactions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). First, I reviewed all audiotapes and videotapes and extended field notes that included information about how Gina used nonverbal or verbal language that seemingly positioned students as readers/writers. I also searched for counter-examples that potentially alienated students from literacy events. In a micro-ethnography, discourse analysis is typically used to examine social interaction through talk. For this study in particular, discourse analysis was used to uncover how positioning shaped the construction of literacy identities (Bloome et al., 2005; van Lagenhove & Harré, 1999). I developed a table (see Table 1) that primarily focused on Gina's interactive positionings (how she positioned students as readers and writers) and reflexive positionings (how her positioning as a teacher shaped students' positions as readers and writers) to illustrate the data analysis process and the coding scheme I used. Analysis of Gina's interactive and reflexive positionings provided a means to explore how she navigated responses to position students as readers/writers.

Within that analysis, I provided commentary that described how students took up or resisted those positionings. For example, I indicated that Gina's use of "we" in her open-ended question assumed that students were members of a particular reading event and were capable and willing to engage in a competitive reading. After Gina asked her open-ended question, both Sam and Raul took up those positionings by transforming the reading into an active and engaged reader's theater. Field notes reflecting classroom interactional patterns, interviews, and artifacts added more insight into the classroom interactions.

To verify and confirm interpretations of data, I triangulated transcripts from classroom discussions with data collected from multiple sources (i.e., teacher and various students), used other researchers to support claims, member checked with participants, peer debriefed with colleagues, and monitored the obtrusiveness of my presence in the classroom (Eisenhart & Howe, 1992; Erickson, 1986). Member checking involved discussions with both students and Gina about interpretations of the transcripts. Frequently

**Table 1.** Interactive and Reflexive Positionings

Classroom Interaction	Interactive Positioning	Reflexive Positioning
<p><b>Gina:</b> Are we having a reading battle? [Laughs]</p> <p><b>Sam:</b> I can read better than you.</p> <p><b>Raul:</b> He can't read. Look, he can't even hold the book right.</p> <p><b>Gina:</b> Reading battle [sing-song like].</p>	<p>Gina's open-ended question ("Are we having a reading battle?") recognized the debate between Raul and Sam about who is a better reader and redirected the structure of the debate into an event with potential to situate both students as readers (as seen below). Her use of "we" in her open-ended question assumed that students were members of this reading event and were capable and willing to engage in a competitive reading battle. Johnston (2004) suggests that collective pronouns invite and express "solidarity" and "encourage collective stories" (p. 66). Gina's choice to use a playful, unofficial response ("read-off") and appropriate students' social practices positioned students as readers and co-constructors of the classroom, inviting them to break the traditional roles and borders of the reading structure (Johnston, 2004).</p>	<p>Gina positioned herself as a teacher who was aware of her students' interests and connected them to a popular high school experience shared by most of her students and transferred it to this local classroom experience.</p>

both teacher and students added a new perspective to the data, which I integrated into my analysis. Over time, Gina became more comfortable with voicing her interpretations of data and did so in conversation or in written commentary on presentations, memos, or manuscripts. Thick description of an extended stay in one classroom provided a detailed portrait of classroom interactions that invited students to become members of the literacy community in hopes that those situations will be informative for others. The point of the research was not to develop a list of questions or sentence starters that teachers could use to position students as readers and writers in their classroom. Instead, the intention was to provide snapshots to open dialogue about the complexity of classroom interactions and improvisations.

**Over time, Gina became more comfortable with voicing her interpretations of data and did so in conversation or in written commentary on presentations, memos, or manuscripts.**

## Findings

The ability to respond during classroom interactions in ways that position students as readers and writers across several literacy events is central to the success of literacy students. For this article, I chose three events that illustrated how Gina's improvised responses positioned students as readers and writers. I discuss how she positioned students from disengaged to engaged

readers, from resistant to capable writers, and as members of a writing community. I purposefully chose interactions in which students eventually took up engaged and capable positions as literacy students to provide models of successful events. To provide context to those events, I describe Gina and her pedagogical beliefs.

### **The Teacher: “They are forming their identities as we speak.”**

At the time of this study, Gina was an alternatively certified teacher in her third year of teaching. Gina is a white teacher working with primarily Latino/Latina and African American students. These differing cultural backgrounds are important to note because they oftentimes shaped classroom interactions (e.g., topics of discussion, how students spoke with one another). During interviews, she expressed three topics that characterized her teaching: development of student agency; empowerment; and awareness of how her race, class, and gender shaped her pedagogy and classroom interactions.

Gina wanted not only to help prepare students to be readers and writers but also to help them make sense of themselves and the world around them. Consistent with theories of critical pedagogy, Gina believed that students should learn to question ideologies and practices that they consider to be oppressive and attempt to take action against those oppressions within their local contexts (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Shor, 1992). In an interview, she explained that many of her students felt like their life paths had already been determined.

They are forming their identities as we speak. . . . By the time I get them in junior year, some of them feel like it’s done, that their life is chosen for them. It’s constantly evolving and it’s not over yet. It’s not decided. . . . A lot of students at our school feel pigeon-holed. It’s important to help them understand that they are still in control.

Gina recognized that students entered the classroom and positioned themselves along storylines related to race, class, and gender. For example, in an interview Gina stated that she was surprised by Raul’s (a senior) eagerness to read and discuss in class that day and tried hard to keep him involved in the reading and discussion because it rarely occurred. During an interview with Raul he admitted that he sometimes felt people stereotyped him as a “dumb Mexican.” These positionings shaped how her students participated in classroom interactions related to reading and writing. To deal with this issue she created a curriculum that provided opportunities for students to construct literacy identities by reading and writing about relevant issues in their everyday lives.

Gina also believed that teachers should empower students and be models of agency. She modeled what an “agent of change” looks like by actively creating much-needed spaces for students within the school. In an interview, she explained how and when she decided that empowerment was a pedagogical goal for the year:

The actual empowerment, probably last year. Because I think that I was so focused on myself for the first two years that just last year I started focusing less on myself and more on them. And I started realizing all of the things that they didn’t have that the other kids at other schools have. And so it began with the creative writing class. . . . Other schools have a creative writing elective, why don’t we?

Along with the creative writing class, Gina started the school’s literary anthology. She also worked with a program that prepared first-generation college students for college and was cosponsor of the school’s poetry slam club. Thus, Gina entered the year with specific goals about literacy, agency, and empowerment. These storylines inevitably shaped how she interacted with students.

Gina was also aware that her race and class shaped how she positioned her students. She emphasized the importance of sharing her background with her students to make connections. She stated, “If I don’t share, stereotypes become a barrier.” When she described the first day she taught, she talked about herself and found that students had assumptions about her as a white, blonde-haired teacher. She said that some of her students assumed that she was rich and snobby. After telling her students that she was born in Colombia, lived in Laredo, and was knowledgeable about hip-hop and slam poetry, she was able to make connections with students and the gap lessened. However, she recognized that the differences between her students and her would always remain:

I don’t try to say I have a clue. I connect to you in some ways and in some ways I’ll never know. There is a balance. You don’t want to say I know exactly what you are going through because I don’t. I don’t know what it feels like to get on the bus and someone clutches their purse.

Sharing her stories enabled students to better understand her experiences and background. Rather than ignoring issues of racism, Gina attempted to recognize the conflict and worked through the tensions by building relationships with her students. Students trusted her with personal information, introduced her to their parents, and came to talk with her between classes and during lunch. Gina’s rapport is related to her awareness of students’ identities and how they relate to how they position themselves as literacy

students. She was able to draw on students' backgrounds and interests to invite students into this particular community of practice. This description of Gina provides initial insights into the ways Gina positioned her students, encouraged students to reposition her, and viewed her students and herself within a social, cultural, and historical context of her school and classroom.

### “Are We Having a Reading Battle?”: Positioning Students from Disengaged to Engaged Readers

Gina consistently responded to disengaged students by inviting and expecting them to co-construct both the structure and content of literacy events based on their needs and interests. The following portrait illustrates how Gina's improvised responses, that appropriated students' social language during a whole-class reading, shaped the collective transformation of the structure of a whole-class reading event that eventually engaged disengaged readers. Prior to this episode, students were asked to read portions of *Fallen Angels* by Walter Dean Myers (1994) at home and return to class with discussion notes in the form of a dialectical journal that focused on issues such as characterization, war, and segregation. Raul, a typically disengaged repeating junior, surprisingly read aloud a portion of a chapter. According to field notes, most students were disengaged during the read-aloud. To ameliorate boredom, Sam interrupted Raul and asked if there was a movie based on the book.

**SAM:** They got a movie of this?

**STACEY:** They got that movie with Tom Hanks.

**GINA:** I don't think so.

**SAM:** We should make it.

**GINA:** Let's make it. . . . That's a good idea . . .

**SAM:** I know some kids don't like reading, so . . .

**RAUL:** He can't read, that's why he is saying that. [Laughs]

**GINA:** Are we having a reading battle? [Laughs]

**SAM:** I can read better than you.

**RAUL:** He can't read. Look, he can't even hold the book right.

**GINA:** Reading battle [singsong like].

**FREDDY:** Read-off.

**GINA:** Read-off . . .

**STACEY:** Like that little dance-off we had. [Laughs]

Following Sam and Raul's debate about who is a better reader, Gina appropriated students' social language by using playful, unofficial responses (reading battle; read-off) to position students as engaged readers and co-constructors of the reading event. Rather than shutting down what some linguists call "put downs" or "signifying," Gina used them to invite Raul and Sam into the classroom community (Rex, 2006; Smitherman, 1977). Smitherman (1977) explains that "signifying" is a term to describe an African American mode of discourse that "refers to the verbal art of insult in which the speaker humorously puts down, talks about, needles—that is, signifies on—the listener" (p. 118). She argued that teachers do not need to be able to speak African American Vernacular English (AAVE), but they should understand and accept it to use it as a code for transmitting knowledge. By appropriating students' playful language into the reading event, Gina positioned herself as a teacher who trusted and respected her students' interests, social languages, and cultural events and transferred those experiences shared by most of her students to this literacy event to position students as engaged readers. She also shifted alignment so that students had the opportunity to build knowledge in their own way. Shifts in alignment are related to the ways in which students take on positions of power. Thus, through this alignment shifting, students took up positions of power by demonstrating ownership and independence in this event.

Consequently, students took up those positions by collectively transforming the event into a reader's theater (as seen below).

**GINA:** We can read in unison?

**SOME STUDENTS:** "Most of the day" . . .

**GINA:** One, two . . .

**FREDDY:** Wait, let's read in harmony.

**OMAR:** Two.

**GINA:** Three.

[Some students read, but they were not on the correct line.]

**SAM:** Where we start at Miss?

**GINA:** "Most of the day."

**ALL STUDENTS:** "Most of the day was spent sitting around . . .

[Students quit reading.]

**SAM:** "Most of the day was spent sitting around . . ."



The dialogue shifted to a choral reading when Gina, positioning herself as a facilitator of this co-constructed event, asked students to read together in an attempt to connect students to the reading. Gina used collective pronouns (“We can read in unison?”) to engage and invite students into the reading event. Such collective pronouns invited “solidarity” within this reading event (Johnston, 2004, p. 66) by asking everyone to be actively involved. To guide students into the collective reading, she counted and directed them (“Most of the day”) to the paragraph. Students attempted to read in unison but resisted after most students did not engage. Sam continued reading alone until Freddy read aloud the next few lines in the voice and tone of the character, similar to a reader’s theater.

**FREDDY:** “I thought the stories were part of the training. There were a lot of black guys there. [Students laugh] I didn’t think there would be so many. Some of them stayed off to themselves, but one guy was making the rounds of all the other blacks.”

**DETREK:** “‘The way I figured it, we’ve got to stick together over here.’ He had three rings on the hand he waved them in the air. ‘I can’t trust no whitey to watch my back when the deal goes down.’”

The dialogue was interrupted by students laughing at Detrek’s mispronunciation of whitey (“wit-tee”). Gina pronounced it for him and began reading again.

**GINA:** “‘So, what do you want to do?’ I asked. ‘We’ve got to make an oath or something,’ Rings said. ‘You know, mingle some blood. That’s symbolic of what we going to be about over here in this strange land.’”

**RAUL:** “The dude was serious. I watched him take out a pocket knife and cut his wrist. Then he handed the knife to Peewee.”

**FREDDY:** “‘You’ve got to be out of your mind!’”

Most students laughed at Freddy’s enthusiastic characterization of Peewee in the last sentence. From the beginning of this episode, Freddy shifted the interaction from a single-person reading event to a reader’s theater reading event, positioning himself as an engaged and active reader. Detrek and Raul also took up this position by joining in the active reading. Although other students did not choose to read in this structure, observational notes indicated that students participated by laughing and making comments about dramatic characterizations by classmates. To facilitate engagement, Gina

entered in the dialogue when needed (to help Detrek pronounce *whitey*, to explain the use of the term, and to direct students back to the reader's theater by reading a few lines from the book). The reader's theater continued in a similar format.

**GINA:** Go ahead, "Peewee said."

**FREDDY:** "'You sit there cutting your own damn self, you don't need nobody watching your back!'"

[Students laugh again.]

**GINA:** "'You don't understand,' Rings said. 'This is symbolic of our common African blood.'"

**FREDDY:** "'Yeah, all that is cool, but I want my common African blood in my common African veins.'"

**GINA:** "Peewee said. 'You ignorant!' Rings pointed at Peewee."

**STACEY:** Ooh, she said, "You ignorant!"

**GINA:** "Rings shook his head and slid the knife across the table to me. 'I got hemophilia,' I said. 'If I cut myself, I won't stop bleeding.' 'You a Uncle Tom, what you is,' Rings said. 'If you had some damn hemophilia, they wouldn't have you in no army!' He grabbed his knife, got up, and walked away. I watched him go."

**FREDDY:** "'That fool is crazy!'"

Throughout this interaction, Gina took on the position of facilitator by redirecting students back toward engagement in the reading event. For example, she continued the reader's theater after Stacey interjected a comment ("Ooh, she said, 'You ignorant'"). Freddy took up the position as reader and continued to read in the character's tone/voice.

Even though only three male students were vocally involved in the reader's theater (Sam, Detrek, and Freddy), field notes showed that more students were engaged in the reading through laughter and side comments (e.g., Raul, Stacey, Shane, June, and Omar) and in the discussion that followed:

**GINA:** Peewee is actually surprised that there are so many black guys in the army. Um, you have to realize that if we look at statistics, a large, large portion were minorities, right? What does Rings say? He wants to be blood brothers, right? Why is Rings so worried about Whitey?

**OMAR:** Because he is worried they won't trust him.

**GINA:** What is going on in the United States at this time?

**RAUL:** Segregation.

**GINA:** . . . People were over there fighting for a country that they had no rights for. Um and so that was a big controversy and then Rings wants to be blood brothers but they don't want to right? He says, "You an Uncle Tom." Where does that come from? Uncle Tom?

**CHERYLE:** That is a white dude's name.

**GINA:** Uncle Tom's Cabin. . . . So, an allusion is a reference to another piece of work. He said "you an uncle tom." He is making reference to a book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. So it is an allusion. A literary allusion. If I was reading something and it mentions Adam and Eve, what did Adam and Eve come from?

**SEVERAL STUDENTS (JUNE, STACEY, AND SHANE):** The Bible.

**GINA:** An illusion is like magic shows. If you are reading something that mentions Adam and Eve, that is a Biblical allusion.

**SHANE:** What was *Uncle Tom's Cabin* about?

**GINA:** Slave days.

Several students (Raul, Omar, Stacey, Cheryle, and Shane) took up Gina's positionings as active participants and engaged readers through vocal responses. For example, Raul, Omar, Stacey, and Cheryle answered Gina's questions about the reading and Shane asked a question about a specific allusion. Shane's question about *Uncle Tom's Cabin* suggested both that he was interested in the conversation and that he felt comfortable asking questions. Gina also repositioned herself as instructor who directed students toward a planned topic of discussion: segregation ("What is going on in the United States as this time?"). Thus, the discussion opened spaces for students to engage in the reading in ways that the reader's theater did not.

Wenger (1998) argues that if a member of the community of practice fails to learn as expected, learning might need to be redirected to offer participants an alternative form. At the beginning of this episode, learners resisted because of their disengagement. By positioning herself as a facilitator rather than director, Gina provided an opportunity for students to transform the reading structure to meet their needs. At this point, students took on more responsibility for determining the structure, while still under the support and guidance of the teacher. Gina's guidance in crafting a more active structure served as a model for an alternative way for students to read, which shaped how disengaged students repositioned themselves in the class as readers.

Thus, the gradual move toward taking on more responsibility indicated that students, particularly Freddy, Detrek, and Sam, took up positions as readers, specifically engaged readers. Gina used her knowledge of students' backgrounds and interests to make decisions about what she said and how, when, and why she said it. In a sense, Gina improvised responses or unexpectedly arranged social interactions to “craft a response in time and space” to accomplish the purpose of situating her students as readers within this event. She drew from both personal (i.e., knowledge about “read-offs”) and professional resources (i.e., knowledge about teaching reading) to shape an unplanned situation to fit her objective for the day. Gina's spontaneous responses that appropriated students' social interactions shaped a disengaged reading event into an event in which students co-constructed the structure of the event, pushing against the narrow margins of what traditional reading looks like in some high school classrooms. Thus, Gina's interactive positionings (i.e., how she positioned her students) were both spontaneous and purposeful and were related to her reflexive positionings described at the beginning of this section (i.e., she positioned herself as a teacher who wanted to facilitate the construction of reading and writing identities in her classroom).

**Gina's spontaneous responses that appropriated students' social interactions shaped a disengaged reading event into an event in which students co-constructed the structure of the event, pushing against the narrow margins of what traditional reading looks like in some high school classrooms.**

### “This is so stupid. I don't want this.”: Positioning a Student from Resistant to Capable Writer

Gina typically taught writing in a writing workshop format in which students met with her and their peers frequently throughout the process. These meetings opened opportunities for Gina to construct spontaneous responses that positioned resistant students into capable writers by helping them build an agentive narrative, or belief that they knew how to accomplish the assigned writing task. Prior to this event, students wrote reflective *This I Believe* essays (designed by National Public Radio) about personal beliefs in a supportive small-group writing workshop setting. Gina expected that students would transfer their knowledge and competence from the former essays into the reflective essay for the composition section of the state exam. In this episode, Gina asked students to write prompts for the exam composition, put them in a bucket, and randomly pick a prompt to begin writing an essay in class (i.e., prompt roulette). In the dialogue below, Detrek, an African American

male who typically performed as the classroom comedian, refused to write on the prompt he chose from the bucket. Through unplanned open-ended questions, Gina consistently invited Detrek into the writing event and expected him to behave as a writer.

**DETREK:** Miss, no. I need to switch mine. This is so stupid. I don't want this.

**GINA:** What will you do on Tuesday?

**FREDDY:** Detrek, that is what we're supposed to think and then you gotta translate it.

**DETREK:** When I was addicted to . . . Miss, I don't smoke.

**GINA:** Is it only drugs you can be addicted to?

Initially, Gina posed a question to Detrek ("What will you do on Tuesday?") to give meaning and purpose to the classroom activity. This question positioned Detrek as a writer on test day, reminding him of his future position. Thus, she opened a space of participation by challenging him ("What will you do on Tuesday? . . . Is it only drugs you can be addicted to?") to engage in a writing practice that was to be valued in the future (Wenger, 1998). Gina positioned herself as a facilitator who would push him to complete this "stupid" assignment to prepare him for test day.

After Detrek continued to resist Gina's high expectations, Gina reworded her question and asked him to expand on the concept of addiction to elicit a response and broaden writing options. This question opened new ways of viewing the prompt and attempted to help Detrek develop an agentive narrative or storyline of a writer who could strategically perform and accomplish the goals of reflective and standardized writing (Johnston, 2004). Below, Gina reworded the student-authored prompt for Detrek so that the structure paralleled that of the standardized exam.

**GINA:** Let's change it to . . . What do you like to write about? What do you feel in the mood for today? [Gina read the prompt and broadened the original question.]

**DETREK:** I feel like I want to switch this.

**GINA:** No. Tell me something you like to write about. You can't switch. Will you answer my question?

**DETREK:** What do I like to write about, uhhhh, alien movies. I don't know, alien stories.

**GINA:** Alien stories. Interesting. Do you feel addicted to alien stories? [Gina and Detrek laugh.] HUMOR!! What else do you like to write about? Could you possibly be addicted to humor? Could you write about that? What does addiction mean? Go beyond what you think it might mean. . . . you need to look it up in here and find some synonyms.

Initially, Gina asked a series of spontaneous open-ended questions to Detrek after the first few did not initiate any writing (“What do you like to write about? What do you feel in the mood for today?”). Both of these questions positioned Detrek as a writer by assuming he had ideas to write about. In addition, these questions asked Detrek to draw from past writing experiences that provided a space for past knowledge and personal experiences to contribute to the writing practice he was resisting (Wenger, 1998). It is through background experiences and knowledge that people become members of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Gina also refused to accept Detrek’s resistance to her positioning (“No. Tell me something you like to write about. You can’t switch. Will you answer my question?”). This intentional set of statements and questions persistently positioned Detrek as a writer by expecting him to respond with a topic or plan for his writing. Such a response required an agentive narrative on Detrek’s part because in order to respond, he must talk from a writer’s perspective. In addition, these questions attempted to shift alignment and circulate power to Detrek by asking genuine meaningful questions that Detrek could relate to his life and interests. Despite Gina’s efforts, he relentlessly resisted.

After Detrek replied with “alien stories,” Gina continued to position herself as a writing coach by responding with a series of questions that specifically made connections to Detrek’s humorous nature (“Do you feel addicted to alien stories? [Gina and Detrek laugh.] HUMOR!! What else do you like to write about? Could you possibly be addicted to humor? Could you write about that?”). Through this playful language, Gina positioned Detrek as a writer who could draw from familiar knowledge and experiences to write this essay. Gina appropriated his interests and background to counter resistance. After directing him to the dictionary, she engaged in a writing conference with another writer.

Observational notes indicated that Detrek attempted to write his essay by using the definition of *addiction*, as suggested by Gina, but was easily distracted. Directly after he opened the dictionary, he walked over to the other end of the classroom, sharpened his pencil, and on his way back to his desk distracted Raul who grabbed the stuffed animal that Detrek had pinned to

his shirt for Valentine's Day in honor of his mother, a soldier in war. Gina noticed the distraction and said, "I want to see that you have worked on something by the end of the period." Detrek looked back in the dictionary and read aloud the listed synonyms for *addicted*.

**DETREK:** Drug user. Crackhead. Cokehead. Dopefiend. Drugfiend. Junkie. Alcoholic. Druggie. Freak.

[Gina walked over to Detrek's desk and looked at the dictionary.]

**GINA:** Where's your thesis?

**DETREK:** It's invisible.

**GINA:** Let me see what you have. What do you want to say? So . . . watching a lot of alien movies has done what?

**DETREK:** Made me an alien.

**GINA:** Has it changed your life? Forced you to miss school? Helped you write better alien stories?

**DETREK:** So that's all I really need, just one idea?

Detrek continued to vocally resist at the beginning of the episode ("It's invisible"; "Made me an alien"). Although Gina initially did not take that topic seriously, she asked him pointed questions about the seriousness of his addiction to help him think deeper about the topic ("Has it changed your life? Forced you to miss school?"). Finally, Detrek's last question ("So that's all I really need, just one idea?") represented a shift in his discursive positioning when he stopped resisting and took up the position of a writer.

Following Detrek's question, Gina nodded her head and was distracted by Freddy, who had a question about his prompt. Detrek sat in his desk and wrote uninterrupted for a short time. When Gina returned, she picked up Detrek's paper, read what he wrote, and said, "OK, now, so are you trying to say that addiction is bad? Does all addiction have to be bad?" Finally, after much resistance, Detrek negotiated the position of comedian and writer by writing about an addiction to alien stories. Shortly after Gina's comment, the bell rang and Detrek took his attempt at the alien addiction story with him. Despite Detrek's aloof comments throughout most of the interaction, Gina did not position him as incapable. Even after he positioned himself as a writer and produced a paragraph, she continued to challenge him by asking questions about the content of his piece. By positioning herself as a writing coach she asked questions, made connections to his everyday life and interests, and gave persistent support that positioned Detrek as a capable

writer equipped with an agentive narrative about how to write reflective essays, a position that he eventually took up after much resistance, when he wrote about being an alien-movie junkie. In addition, Gina improvised by pulling from her knowledge about his background (humor) and used this unexpected resource in an unplanned event to create a response in this context that accomplished the purpose of writing a reflective essay (Holland et al., 1998). Gina was aware of the ways in which Detrek's identities shaped his literacy identity, and she shifted responses until she was able to help him negotiate those identities and finally position himself as a writer. Thus, Gina shaped and shifted both her reflexive positionings (i.e., writing coach) and her interactive positionings (i.e., writer) in ways that opened spaces for Detrek to write.

Gina's ability to reposition herself and Detrek based on the needs of the moment was an important part of constructing a writer identity for Detrek. As Wenger (1998) argues, people construct identities based on how they "reconcile [their] various forms of membership into one identity" (p. 149). For Detrek, being a comedian and a writer were identities that he struggled to negotiate. Through his resistance, he seemed to ask, "How can I maintain my status as classroom comedian while at the same time position myself as a successful writer on a standardized exam within this public classroom event?" Later that year, and despite his resistance to the practice essay, Detrek successfully wrote a reflective essay on his standardized exam and passed all sections.

### **"She used big words, like *indignant*." : Positioning Students as Members of a Writing Community**

Gina consistently responded to classroom interactions that positioned students as insiders of a writing community, particularly through writing assignments. At the beginning of major writing assignments, Gina engaged in think-alouds as she constructed her own essays. Toward the end of such assignments, Gina expected students to share their writing and engage in dialogue about both its content and structure. The following episode focuses on a whole-class conversation about writing, an event that occurred toward the end of a 6-week period of reflective writing. Gina tried to position a student (Lucy) as an insider within the writing community through a planned lesson that anonymously used Lucy's writing as an exceptional example, but her attempts unintentionally caused classmates to position Lucy outside the literacy community. Gina relied on improvised responses to redirect the discussion back to a more productive conversation.



To provide context for the classroom discussion below, I provide a short summary of Lucy's essay. Lucy wrote her essay about her transition from Mexico to the United States during middle school. She stated: "I felt dejected because I wanted to study but I didn't want to start all over again. I didn't want to feel lonely and lost in an unknown school. I didn't want to feel different just because they spoke a different language that I didn't understand a word of." Although initially she decided not to go to school, in the end she stated, "I was throwing away my future and dreams and living the life of an adult all because of my fears of starting all over again." Lucy struggled most with being a second language learner. However, by the time she entered Gina's room, she had an advanced mastery of the language. Lucy did not like to speak in front of the whole classroom and explained in a written interview: "I don't want to feel embarrassment of my English, I am too shy. I feel uncomfortable talking in front of the classroom." Unfortunately, after the reading, Stacey recognized the story and told the whole class that it was Lucy's. Gina recognized that the cover was blown and tried to redirect the conversation toward talk about the content of the essay rather than Lucy's personal story as illustrated in the question below.

**GINA:** So, what was the focus of that essay? What was her point?

**STACEY:** She overcame her fears.

**GINA:** When you overcome your fear, you want to accomplish something.

**CAROLE:** You didn't speak English when you came for real?

[Lucy nods at Carole.]

**CAROLE:** Did people look at you like?

**STACEY:** She looked at you like, huh?

**CAROLE:** For real? I just want to know.

[Lucy did not respond.]

Gina posed open-ended questions ("So, what was the focus of that essay? What was her point?") about the essay to facilitate conversation about the focus and point of Lucy's reflection. Although Stacey attempted to answer, Carole took the conversation in an unexpected direction that focused specifically on Lucy's personal story about being an immigrant. Lucy only responded with a nod, indicating her discomfort with the direction of the conversation. The public reading of Lucy's story could have alienated her by positioning her as culturally and linguistically different from the other students and

potentially silencing her even more. Gina recognized Lucy's discomfort, positioned herself as facilitator, and redirected the conversation back to its initial purpose. Gina repeated Stacey's words and posed more questions about the structure of the essay.

**GINA:** So, for one thing, the essay was about overcoming fears. Was that from the beginning to the end? Did it stay focused?

[Students nod.]

**GINA:** So, one thing is that it was focused from beginning to end. If I ask you what the point is and you can tell me, that means it is a pretty focused essay. . . . What you should do on test day is read your essay and ask yourself, what is the point of this that I'm writing? And if you can figure it out then your essay is focused. What else was done well?

**SHANE:** Yeah, she used big words, like "indignant."

**STACEY:** She used "dejected," I heard that.

**GINA:** Yes, "indignant," so remember all the words you've learned and use them. You also have a thesaurus. . . . What else did she have? Was it a strong voice?

**STACEY AND CAROLE:** Yes.

**GINA:** Why? Did she have dialogue?

**STACEY:** Yes.

**GINA:** Yes, she had dialogue.

**SHANE:** Between her and her dad.

In informal conversations, Gina admitted that she recognized Lucy's discomfort and redirected the classroom conversation back to the structure of the essay by posing more questions to students. Gina could be viewed as "saving face" or protecting Lucy's view of herself so she was not embarrassed or diminished in any way. Discourse analysts (Goffman, 1967) call a threat to face as a threat to one's "ability to feel powerful in that social world" (Rex & Schiller, 2009, p. 45). To restore the sense of efficacy in that context, an intervention from someone else in the circle comes to the rescue. In addition, Gina repaired the fact that Lucy was identified as the author by redirecting the conversation in another direction to help Lucy re-experience social respect in the classroom (Rex & Schiller, 2009). After only a nonverbal response, Gina elicited more information about writing by recapping, extending, and eliciting responses from students by posing questions ("What

you should do on test day is read your essay and ask yourself, what is the point of this that I'm writing? And if you can figure it out then your essay is focused. What else was done well?"). Following her questions were comments about Lucy's use of vocabulary ("she used big words, like 'indignant'") and dialogue ("between her and her dad"). By facilitating this conversation about Lucy's writing, Gina and the classmates noticed and named Lucy's successful writing skills, thus positioning her as insider within the literacy community. Gina and Lucy's classmates confirmed what was successful and asserted Lucy's competence. Gina also used unplanned open-ended questions, elaborations, and clarifications to make explicit specific writing strategies that are successful for reflective compositions. Thus, Gina spontaneously redirected classroom interactions to focus on Lucy's strengths as a writer rather than Lucy's personal story.

Gina unexpectedly crafted a response in this context to deflect attention away from Lucy's life story and to her writing style. She drew from her personal knowledge about Lucy's reluctance to talk and her professional knowledge about English Language Learners to redirect the students' attention toward a discussion about the distinction between writing and writer ("So, for one thing, the essay was about overcoming fears. Was that from the beginning to the end? Did it stay focused?"), both to protect Lucy and to teach students about analyzing a text as writers. Students took up the redirection, positioned themselves as members of a writing community by engaging in constructive dialogue about the writing components of the essay, and together they attempted to position Lucy as an insider by explicitly discussing her successful capabilities as a reflective writer ("Yeah, she used big words, like 'indignant'").

This is especially relevant to Lucy, a second language learner who struggled to navigate both Mexican and U.S. cultures and expectations. Gina's responses supported Lucy's desire to remain silent (i.e., redirecting students to the content of the essay) in the classroom while at the same time positioned Lucy as an insider within the writer's community by explicitly highlighting "good" reflective writing in Lucy's essay. The attention to Lucy's strong writing skills helped to position Lucy as an academic success, which potentially helped her to develop an academically oriented identity (Michaels & Sohmer, 2002). Thus, Gina's reflexive positioning (i.e., facilitator of the writing discussion who respected Lucy's learning needs) shaped her interactive positionings (i.e., redirecting the conversation to the essay) of Lucy as a capable writer, which affected how Lucy positioned herself as a writer in the classroom. Even though Lucy did not participate in this event (orally), she continued to excel in other writing assignments that year and took creative writing with Gina the following year. Wenger (1998) argues

that when people are in a community of practice that is familiar, we can “handle ourselves competently” and are “recognized as competent. We know how to engage with others. We understand why they do what they do” (p. 152). Lucy’s experience is complicated because she is not only struggling to become a member of this classroom but also of the U.S. culture in general. She was in a situation in which she did not always feel competent. This particular experience provided an occasion for other students and the teacher to position themselves and others as writers in this classroom.

## Conclusion

### What Do These Episodes Illustrate about Positioning in Literacy Instruction?

Teaching students to be readers and writers is as much a matter of language socialization, enculturation, identity production, power relations, and situated interaction (i.e., knowing what to do and how to interact with others in a specific situation) as teaching how to manipulate symbol systems. It is also an intimate part of identity formation, both individual and social. How one engages in reading and writing, when, where, and with whom, as well as how one engages in learning to read and write, reflects and constructs one’s identity. (Bloome et al., 2005, p. xvii)

Bloome and his colleagues (2005) underscore how the teaching of reading and writing is a social process revolved around discursive practices. Positioning theory provides a means to investigate how teachers facilitate (through talk) the construction of literacy identities. If we want students to situate themselves as readers and writers, we must “be aware of how we position them and what we say, which over time creates identities that students adopt” (Rex & Schiller, 2009, p. 21). Specifically, this study illustrated how Gina provided students opportunities to facilitate literacy identities through interactions such as open-ended questions, playful language, and connections to student interests during interactions that shifted in unexpected directions. Regardless of that surprise, she positioned students from disengaged to engaged readers, from resistant to capable writers, and included her students as members of a writing community.

Just as important were the responses Gina did *not* choose to use during these unexpected interactions to affirm students’ membership in this community of practice. Easily, Gina could have used language that shut

**Gina was flexible and willing to let her students influence the direction of lessons so that they were positioned and positioned themselves as capable and engaged readers and writers.**

down students' social practices and positioned them as disengaged readers. Instead, Gina was flexible and willing to let her students influence the direction of lessons so that they were positioned and positioned themselves as capable and engaged readers and writers. Although Gina did not share the same cultural background as her students, she was able to trust, respect, and appropriate students' social practices, interests, backgrounds, and capabilities in her daily interactions that engaged her students. Gina was also able to situate her students as readers and writers in these excerpts because she typically had a good rapport with students on a daily basis. Overall, she was able to navigate interactions that engaged students, provided opportunities for students to navigate seemingly contradictory identities, and recognized the competency in her students to build a literacy learning community.

For Gina, teaching was not only about a set of practices or ideologies that she brought to the classroom but also about patterns of interactions that consistently positioned her students as readers and writers. These patterns were improvised in the sense that she drew from personal and professional resources to create unplanned and unexpected responses that positioned students as readers and writers. Such improvisation, however, does not deny that she routinely used words and phrases to create spaces that facilitated the construction of literacy identities and affirmed students as members of this literacy community of practice. These responses were based on pedagogical theory and experience and were practiced regularly in her classroom. In fact, it was her ability to choose the best routines and responses based on students' needs in classrooms that shaped how students positioned themselves as engaged and capable readers and writers in her classroom, inevitably shaping their success as literacy learners.

Several unanswered questions are left to ponder, however. For instance, how can teachers become better at navigating classroom interactions that position students as engaged and capable readers/writers? This story implies that a teacher's beliefs and attitudes about pedagogy (e.g., Gina's belief in agency, empowerment, and awareness of markers of difference) shape those interactions, but what if a teacher enters a classroom with a set of strategies that contradict with how he or she orchestrates classroom interactions? This study also implies that the teacher's ability to provide appropriate responses at the right time has powerful implications on students' success as literacy students. How powerful are teacher's positionings and why do some students resist while others take up those positionings?

With more examination of such classroom interactions in urban classrooms especially, more knowledge about the power teachers' responses play in positioning students will be gained. Although some discussion about

issues of race were discussed in the article, more work needs to be done that specifically examines how culturally relevant pedagogy occurs in classroom interactions between teachers and students in various schools (Rex, 2006). Positioning theory is especially useful in examining the school of experiences of marginalized youth because it reveals how students position themselves as members of a school or classroom or situate themselves outside of those communities. Further examinations of those positionings reveal much about how race, class, gender, and sexuality shape and are shaped by school contexts. Finally, more research needs to examine how teachers navigate use of time and space in classrooms to investigate a variety of classroom interactions rather than just dialogue (Leander & Rowe, 2006).

## Implications

Positioning theory can be used to help preservice and novice teachers become successful navigators of interactions that position students as readers/writers (Rex, 2006). Gina was an alternatively certified teacher who did not receive instruction about how to navigate interactions in ways that foster the construction of literacy identities. She learned from trial and error from her first and second years of teaching, years that she said she was only able to focus on herself. In interviews, Gina did not describe herself as “natural” at navigating these interactions and attributed much of her learning from reflective practice with expert teachers. Novice teachers especially have difficulty navigating interactions and would benefit from case studies of teachers *successfully* navigating classroom interactions to position students as engaged and capable readers/writers (Rex, 2006). Oftentimes it is difficult for new teachers to break free from their scripted lesson due to inexperience. Analysis of case studies would provide preservice teachers with the opportunity to critically examine how interactions occur in current classrooms. One of the central purposes of this piece was to offer a strengths-based perspective to teacher education. Our preservice teachers need more models of what is working in classrooms rather than a deficit perspective of what is not working. I am not arguing that educators should not examine classroom interactions critically; however, I am arguing that we need to spend more time helping preservice teachers leave the university with agentive narratives about how to successfully interact with students. To do that, they need to understand how those interactions play out within the public school institution.

In addition, asking preservice teachers to videotape, transcribe, and analyze their language (verbal and nonverbal) during internships and student teaching would provide opportunities for them to become aware

of how they spontaneously respond in classroom interactions. Specifically asking students to think critically about how their interactions connect/disconnect with their vision as a teacher would also help them think about how to improvise in ways that support their pedagogical beliefs (Alsup, 2005; Britzman, 2005). Rex and Schiller (2009) suggest that educators can create flip books of freeze-framed classroom interactions to facilitate interactional awareness. These opportunities should also continue during professional development during educators' primary years of teaching.

The identities that teachers take on have a direct impact on students' attitudes toward literacy and learning. Williams (2006) argued that teachers should reflect on the metaphors that shape their teaching and also communicate the shifting nature of those identities. He also stated that if teachers position or perform in ways without thinking about their consequences, then teachers are not living up to their job. Thus, teachers would benefit from examining how their beliefs, attitudes, and philosophies about education position students in the classroom. Investigating the ways in which those beliefs match or mismatch to practice would benefit preservice teachers during their fieldwork as well. Overall, as teacher educators we need to do a better job of examining and illustrating how classrooms are like "a group of musicians improvising together" (Cazden, 2001, p. 40) so that teachers are better equipped to navigate interactions that facilitate the construction of literacy identities. Positioning theory provides a means to examining how teachers facilitate (through talk) the construction of literacy identities. For teachers, this could be especially useful in thinking about what words situate students as readers, writers, and members of the classroom and what words situate students outside the classroom. Although there will never be a script for teachers to use to ensure that all students position themselves, it is important that teachers pay attention to the power of their words and how they shape students' experiences in literacy classrooms.

## References

- Alsup, J. (2005). *Teacher identity discourses: Negotiating personal and professional spaces*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Applebee, A. N. (1996). *Curriculum as conversation: Transforming traditions of teaching and learning*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bloome, D., Carter, S. P., Christian, B. M., Otto, S., & Stuart-Faris, N. (2005). *Discourse analysis and the study of classroom language and literacy events: A microethnographic perspective*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Britzman, D. (2005). *Practice makes practice: A critical study of learning to teach*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Bruner, J. (1975). From communication to language: A psychological perspective. *Cognition*, 3, 255-289.

- Cazden, C. (2001). *Classroom discourse: The language of teaching and learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Clarke, L. (2006). Power through voicing others: Girls' positioning of boys in literature circle discussions. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 38(1), 55-79.
- Corsaro, W. A. (1981). Entering the child's world: Research strategies for field entry and data collection in a pre-school setting. In J. Green & C. Wallat (Eds.), *Ethnography and language in educational settings* (pp. 117-146). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Davies, B., & Harré, R. (1990). Positionings: The discursive production of selves. In B. Davies (Ed.), *A body of writing* (pp. 87-106). New York: AltaMira Press.
- Eisenhart, M., & Howe, K. (1992). Validity in educational research. In M. LeCompte, W. Millroy, & J. Preissle (Eds.), *The handbook of qualitative research in education*. (pp. 645-680). New York: Academic Press.
- Erickson, F. (1986). Qualitative methods in research on teaching. In M. C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (5rd ed., pp. 119-161). New York: Macmillan.
- Fairbanks, C., & Arial, M. (2006). The role of social and cultural resources in literacy and schooling: Three contrasting cases. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 40(5), 510-554.
- Finders, P. (1997). *Just girls: Hidden literacies and life in junior high*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Reading the word and the world*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Gee, J. P. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Gee, J. P. (1999). *An introduction to discourse analysis theory and method*. New York: Routledge.
- Gee, J. P. (2005). *An introduction to discourse analysis theory and method* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual*. New York: Pantheon.
- Holland, D., Skinner, D., Lachicotte, W., & Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Johnston, P. (2004). *Choice words: How our language affects children's learning*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning. Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.
- Leander, K. (2002). Locating Latayna: The situated production of identity artifacts in classroom interactions. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 37, 198-250.
- Leander, K., & Rowe, D. (2006). Mapping literacy spaces in motion: A rhizomatic analysis of a classroom literacy performance. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 41(4), 428-460.
- McCarthy, S., & Moje, E. (2002). Identity matters. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 37(2), 228-238.
- Mercer, N. (2000). *Words and minds: How we use language together*. London: Routledge.



- Michaels, S., & Sohmer, R. (2002). *Discourses in search of members: In honor of Ron Scollon*. New York: University Press of America.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Myers, W. D. (1994). *Fallen angels*. New York: Scholastic Paperback.
- Reeves, J. (2009). Teacher investment in learner identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 25*, 34–41.
- Rex, L. (2006). Acting “cool” and “appropriate”: Toward a framework for considering literacy classroom interactions when race is a factor. *Journal of Literacy Research, 38*(5), 275–525.
- Rex, L., & Schiller, L. (2009). *Using discourse analysis to improve classroom interaction*. New York: Routledge.
- Shor, I. (1992). *Empowering education: Critical teaching for social change*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Smitherman, G. (1977). *Talkin and testifyin: The language of Black America*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. London: Sage Publications.
- Street, B. (Ed.). (1995). *Cross-cultural approaches to literacy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- van Langenhove, L. V., and Harré, R. (1999). Introducing positing theory. In R. Harré & L. van Langenhove (Eds.), *Positioning theory* (pp. 14–51). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Wells, G. (2001). *Action, talk and text: Learning and teaching through inquiry*. New York: Teachers College.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Wertsch, J. V. (1991). *Voices of the mind: A sociocultural approach to mediated action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Williams, B. (2006). Another opening, another show: Performing teaching identities in literacy classrooms. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 48*(8), 536–540.
- Wortham, S. (2005). Curriculum as a resource for the development of social identity. *Sociology of Education, 76*, 228–246.
- Yoon, B. (2008). Uninvited guests: The influence of teacher’s roles and pedagogies on the positioning of English language learners in the regular classroom. *American Educational Research Journal, 45*, 495–522.

**Amy Vetter** is an assistant professor in secondary English education at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.