Critical Spaces for Critical Times: Global Conversations in Literacy Research as an Open Professional Development and Practices Resource

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Abstract

This paper reflects an OER (Open Educational Resources) critical literacy project, Global Conversations in Literacy Research (GCLR), (www.globalconversationsinliteracy.wordpress.com), now in its fourth year. GCLR annually hosts up to seven web seminars presented by internationally recognized literacy and education scholars. We outline key dimensions of GCLR not only as an OER but as an open educational practice (OEP) (Andrade et al., 2011) that through its design, not only provides open access to scholarship, but also understands the critical nexus among resources, practices and theory. Informed by data from a

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longitudinal study, this paper situates these dimensions within professional development literature, and outlines GCLR as a critical space designed for critical times, and the importance of intentionality when accessing OER. Like scholars before us, we argue that that availability is not the only consideration when using OER (Andrade et al., 2011); OER must be considered in relation to pedagogical considerations and how OER are used as a critical component to online professional development.

Keywords

education, literacy, professional development, web seminars, critical literacy, critical pedagogy, open educational resources, open educational practice

Introduction

Gateways to digital technologies have increased teaching and learning opportunities across educational spaces, including web seminars. Today's digital technologies (e. g., Blackboard Collaborate, Facebook, Twitter, listservs) make possible open access avenues for sharing and accessing literacy research and practices worldwide (Albers, Pace, & Brown, 2013; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). Central to globalizing spaces of learning are information and communication technologies that enable people from across the world to synchronously engage in a variety of learning and teaching experiences. The educational landscape will shift greatly as more and more people desire real-time, authentic, self-directed, & on-demand learning (Simonson, Schlosser, & Orellana, 2011). The future is now, and we live and work in highly wired and digital spaces whereby open access to resources is much more commonplace (Ehlers, 2011), and those with access can click and access innumerable sites to secure information. Among the myriad of online learning options, web seminars have become popular avenues for teacher professional development, and are increasingly becoming Open Educational Resources (OER) that anyone with Internet access can participate or watch.

The title of our paper is an intentional play on words. We operate in "critical spaces," Internet spaces that provide us with immediate access when we need it, and which is critical to the success of our work and thinking. Understood in another way, we live in critical spaces by which people across the world access information daily and openly, or what is now known as on-demand access. Educators also live in critical times, wherein professional development is organized around such issues as high-stakes testing, and prescriptive reading programs (Larson, 2013; Shannon, 2013). For us, living in critical spaces and critical times requires that educators and researchers have access to OER, driven by theory and pedagogy, that enable them to work as professionals in highly restricted educational spaces (Albers, Pace, & Brown, 2013). This paper discusses an OER critical literacy project, Global Conversations in Literacy Research (GCLR) (www.globalconversationsinliteracy.wordpress.com), that annually hosts up to seven web seminars presented by internationally recognized literacy and education scholars. We outline key dimensions of GCLR not only as an OER but as an open educational practice (OEP)

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(Andrade, Ehlers, Caine, Carneiro, Conole, Kairamo, Koskinen, Kretschmer, Moe-Pryce, Mundin, Nozes, Reinhardt, Richter, Silva & Holmberg, 2011) that, through its design, not only provides open access to scholarship, but also reflects an understanding of the critical nexus among resources, practices and theory. Informed by data from a longitudinal study, this paper situates this project within online professional development, outlines GCLR as a critical space designed for critical times, and suggests the importance of intentionality when accessing OER. Like scholars before us, we argue that availability is not the only consideration when using OER (Andrade et al., 2011); OER must be considered in relation to pedagogical considerations. Even more importantly for us is how OER are used as critical components to online professional development.

Global Conversations in Literacy Research: A Critical Literacy Project

Launched in 2010 as a series of live one-hour open access web seminars, GCLR as an OER uses digital technologies to connect with global audiences in an effort to exchange progressive ideas on literacy theory, research, and practice. As a critical literacy project, GCLR understands that literacy is a global endeavor with a mission to "connect diverse and global audiences, collaborate and exchange ideas on international issues in literacy, and acknowledges that diverse, multiple and global perspectives are vital resources for changing consciousness around literacy research and practice (http://globalconversationsinliteracy.wordpress.com/gclr-mission-and-goals/). As an OER with a critical literacy stance, GCLR offers open access to educators, researchers, and those interested in literacy live engagement with internationally recognized scholars of literacy. Understanding that financial restrictions and time constraints prohibit many from traveling to professional conferences to participate in such scholarship, GCLR aims to bridge this access through online web seminars. Supported in part by the National Writing Project (www.nwp.org), GCLR operates with no other outside funding. GCLR has been able to continue as an OER because of its critical literacy position, and accessibility to speakers whose scholarship is grounded in critical literacy, who offer their expertise without honorarium. GCLR uses Blackboard Collaborate as a delivery platform to host web seminars. This platform can host thousands of audience members at an individual seminar, and has a "chat" feature in which audiences can participate in discussions. Chat and audio features in Blackboard allow participants to introduce themselves, and connect with others from around the world. At the end of each series, the GCLR team analyzes and reflects on participant and speaker interviews to consider changes that may better meet the interests and needs of its audiences.

In its efforts to establish global connections, GCLR launched its website in December of 2010 using Wordpress, a free hosting site (www.globalconversationsinliteracy.wordpress.com) with information about seminars, the project, and the people involved in the project as well as archived web seminars. The project also added Clustrmap, a mapping and tracking widget that indicates from where people access the site (Figure 1).

As of this writing, statistics generated from Clustrmap indicate that GCLR has had over 36,200 visitors from 161 (out of 196) countries and over 70,000 views of its pages. In August of 2011, GCLR started a Facebook page and Twitter account that to this date has over 700 and 600 followers respectively. In February of 2013, GCLR launched its YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCay7UB8Mm5SpRnPy6Mxl5Gg) that houses archived web seminars. Across the four years, GCLR has provided online professional development via live web seminars to over 6000 people worldwide, and via archived web seminars to over 12,000 people. In total as of this writing, as an OER, GCLR has provided online professional development (PD) to over 18,000 people. We suggest these numbers indicate impact. First, literacy is a critical topic in all parts of the world, and those involved in the literacy of children and adults are yearning for OER that may offer suggestions on how to improve reading and writing. Second, educators continually search out pedagogical ideas to implement into their educational spaces with an aim to support learners' literacy development (Albers, Pace, & Brown, 2013; Angay-Crowder et al., 2014). Third, audiences seek opportunities to engage live with international scholars, converse in the chat with others, pose questions about literacy research and practice, and offer up ideas that they wish to share.

Such open access opportunities for such professional development are difficult to come by, and we see GCLR as a critical space for critical times. We now turn to the core principles of critical literacy (Edelsky, 2006; Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008; Janks, 2010) around which GCLR is situated.

Theoretical Perspectives Grounding GCLR

While describing pedagogies of responsibility and place, Comber, Nixon, and Reid (2007) argued that in the teaching of literacy, our role as teachers must include expanding our own repertoires of literacy and communicating practices in order to design relevant engagements for our students: "Literacy teaching cannot, and we believe it should not, be a content-free zone. We know that there is great potential for students to expand their literate repertoires when they become deeply engaged in acquiring new knowledge about things that matter…." (p.2). We position the work of GCLR in critical literacy and pedagogy in which literacy is situated in the larger issues of society.

In brief, critical literacy is both a theory and practice, inspired by the work of Paulo Freire (1970) who sought to emancipate Brazilian farmers from the tyranny of their landowners by teaching them to read the underlying meanings of the contracts under which they worked. A significant tenet of critical literacy is to provide transformative teaching (Edelsky, 2006) that extends teachers' own agencies toward countering and teaching against hierarchies that restrict teachers' professionalism. Luke and Freebody (1999) called critical literacy the "new basic," which seeks to support learning that looks deeply at authors' messages, interrogates commonplace assumptions (e.g., how are mothers and fathers constructed in Mother's and Father's Day cards?), includes and values multiple perspectives, and encourages social action and transformation. Critical literacy scholars (Edelsky, 2006; Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008; Janks, 2010; Shannon, 2011) understand that literacy is not located solely in issues of reading and writing print-based text, but that teachers prepare students to develop literacy practices that engage them in critically examining their world and its assumptions about learning. By teaching from such a stance, students learn from their teachers to interrogate the relationship between language and power, and encourage them to engage in social action to promote social justice. For Edelsky (2006), critical literacy entails transformative work that aims to change, or transform, what schools produce. Shannon (2011) refers to this as reading with agency, and reading towards democracy. Janks (2010) suggests that critical literacy has four orientations: dominance, access, diversity, and design. These orientations take seriously the relation between power and language in literacy education in terms of "maintaining and reproducing relations of domination" (p. 21), and assume that although access to the dominant forms of language is critical, such access sustains language's power and produces inequitable social relations. Diversity, Janks argues, is situated not only in social and cultural interactions, but also in discourses that are "linked to wide range of social identities and embedded in diverse social institutions" (p. 23). As people engage in new discourses they acquire new dispositions and alternative ways to understand their ways of being in this world. Janks (2010) suggests that design positions people to draw and select from the many resources to construct, interpret, and generate meanings. Critical literacy scholars argue that teachers must prepare students not only to read and write, but to develop literacy practices that engage them in critically examining their world and its assumptions about learning, interrogating the relationship between language and power, and engaging in social action to promote social justice (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008).

The lead author, a long-standing critical literacy scholar, has worked with a team of graduate students on GCLR to understand,

design, and organize the project's activities around a critical literacy framework. As a critical literacy project, GCLR attempts to open up dialogic space to anyone who has access to the Internet, and provides an opportunity to dialogue with others, pose questions, and to offer alternative perspectives on literacy education and research. From our own work with GCLR, we know that when an open and critical space is provided for literacy teachers and researchers to engage with others about issues that matter to them, spaces that transcend geographic boundaries, the potential for transformation of their practice and influence on their students is great. Further, with ongoing professional development, educators can expand their students' repertoire of literacy practices, and provide spaces for them to design and develop projects grounded in their own life experiences. Such experiences may contribute to changing inequities in the community and beyond (Janks, 2010). Cochran-Smith, Shakman, Jong, Terrell, Barnatt, and McQuillan (2009) argue that teaching from such a critical stance takes on a social justice perspective in which teachers value interactions where they pose questions, and make decisions based upon how knowledge is constructed and interpreted, teaching strategies, skills, methods, and advocacy (e.g., students, community, colleagues). Further, teachers think about their work and interpret what is going on in schools and classrooms.

OER, OEP and Professional Development: A Review of Literature

Without question, social media, mobile technologies, and new pedagogical formats have transformed and significantly influenced how we learn and how we access learning. In a highly connected and diverse world, people from urban to remote areas are establishing new skills, values, and practices in response to changes in life, especially in light of new and emerging technologies. According to Internet World Stats (http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm) as of December 31, 2013, of the over 7.25 billion people living in the world, 2,802,478,934 use the Internet. Since 2000, usage across all continents has increased 676.3%. According to Bhavnani, Chiu, Janakiram, & Silarszky (2008), although many in developing and remote areas of the world do not have access to laptops or desktop computers, they are increasingly accessing learning materials through mobile devices, and obtaining learning materials wirelessly anytime and anyplace. Further, they are bypassing the wired products in favor of wireless access.

In Bouchard's (2011) perspective, new and emergent technologies are shaping and being shaped by how people interact and engage with others virtually, and position knowledge as fluid, multi-dimensional, and immediate. From an educational standpoint, institutions that rely on face-to-face engagement (e.g., universities, trade schools, K-12 schools) no longer "own" learning (Kop & Fournier, 2010), and OER are increasingly becoming the way to access and download learning materials.

Initially, the concept of Open Educational Resources (OER) was introduced in 2002 by the UNESCO forum (2002) who characterized OER as "free access" enabled by "information and communication technologies" and for "non-commercial purpose" (UNESCO, 2002, p.24). OER make "high-quality educational material freely available worldwide in many languages" (Keller & Mossink, 2008, p. 13). Other scholars like Hylén (2006) and Wiley (2006) have attempted to define OER in the literature, focusing on its nature of challenges, while others situated OER critically in educational practices (Andrade et al., 2011; Ehlers, 2011; Havermann, 2011; Hockings, Brett, & Terentjevs, 2012).

Hylén outlined several challenges of OER, including lack of awareness of copyright issues, quality assurance and sustainability. First, researchers, teachers, authors and users are less prepared in accessing licensed digital materials than using physical products. Second, although there is a preponderance of virtual resources, teachers, students and self-learners find it difficult to match resources to their expectation and relevance. Third, what is the longevity of the available resources? Hylén argued that OER should be seen "as a part of a larger trend towards openness in higher education including more well-known and established movements" (p. 49). Wiley (2006) suggests that OER are defined broadly to include "curriculum materials like lecture materials as well as educational software like computer-based simulations and experiments" (p. 4).

Although OER have challenges, the more recent and significant question has moved from "Where can I find open resources?" to "How should these resources be used?" In essence, OER have moved from issues of availability of resources to issues of practice (Andrade et al., 2011; Ehlers, 2011; Hockings, Brett, & Terentjevs, 2012). Andrade, et al., introduced the concept of open educational practice (OEP) that aims to "provide educational opportunities for all citizens" (p. 11), and to extend the "focus beyond 'access' to 'innovative open educational practices' (OEP)" (p. 2). That is, a more important consideration is to what extent will "access support educational practices and promote quality and innovation in teaching and learning" (Ehlers, 2011, p. 2). The move from OER to OEP begins with OER with an emphasis on how OER can be used, reused, shared, and adapted (Ehlers, 2011). Thus, scholarship around the pedagogies that use OER is warranted (Gurell, Kuo, & Walker, 2010), and when situated within OEP, OER have an "immense" potential to transform the global education landscape (Olcott, 2012, p. 283).

Professional development is a critical necessity in today's educational environment, and many institutions are struggling to provide appropriate and effective training and professional development (PD) opportunities for faculty and students (Vu, Cao, Vu, & Cepero, 2014). The literature in PD provides readers with numerous ways to integrate critical literacy into one's practices (see for example, Harste & Albers, 2013; Janks, 2010; Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008; Norris, Lucas, & Prudoe, 2012; Vasquez, 2010; Wohlwend, 2011). The aforementioned studies describe how educators can support a critical perspective in classrooms, and a number of excellent examples can be found within. However, we could find no literature that addressed open access professional development situated within a critical literacy perspective.

Online professional development has been around since the Internet (Donavant, 2009), and with on-demand access to learning materials, teachers are eager to access alternative and online resources to continue their learning. According to Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009), effective online professional development offers opportunities for thoughtful and sustained engagement in life-long learning, and a number of studies have been conducted to investigate this phenomenon. Thomas's (2010) dissertation study analyzed the perceptions of 50 educators regarding face-to-face and online professional development. She found that "instructors and online participants indicated that they preferred online professional development to traditional face-to-face professional development" (p. 105). This study also revealed that online professional development participants had an overall positive perception of the effects of the course on their teaching methods.

In OER like GCLR, Albers, Pace, and Brown (2013), researchers interviewed speakers and participants to understand the challenges and affordances of participation n in web seminars. Speakers found it challenging to follow chat comments/questions during their presentation, and two wished they "could see the audience faces." For participants, web seminars afforded them "an awesome opportunity to hear from an expert," open access professional development, convenience, and flexibility in terms of viewing live or archived seminars. Rich (2011), in a study on webinar instruction, found that participants enjoyed being a part of web seminars largely due the "up-to-date" topics presented, convenience, and that "they learned just as much from the other attendees on line as they did from the presenters" (p. 87). Further, in this mixed methods research study, Rich found that participants enjoyed learning through technology, while two of the participants integrated webinars into their classrooms. Other researchers, like Rich, suggest that face-to-face professional development for many educators is nearly impossible due to costs associated with PD (Odden, 2011). Across studies, emerging themes indicate that online professional development involves opportunities for teachers to share their expertise and experiences, learn from others, and collaborate on real-world issues (Albers, Pace, & Brown, 2013; Bolt, 2012; Laurillard & Masterman, 2010).

Within the past ten years, the increasingly popular mode of delivery known as "blended learning" (also referred to as "hybrid," "mixed," or "combined") has emerged as the dominant model for combining traditional and face-to-face models in online learning (Alammary, Sheard, & Carbone, 2014; Moskal, Dziuban , & Hartman, 2013). Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, and Jones (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of over 1,100 empirical studies and found that blended learning was more effective than either online learning or face-to-face. What this means for researchers and educators across the globe is that blended learning most likely will become the delivery choice for most courses in higher education (Moskal, Dziuban, & Hartman, 2013). As an OER, GCLR blends the best of both (e.g., live presentations, traditional talks, online methods that allow for interaction with the presenter and audience through chat, white board, emoticons, and discussion rooms, synchronous/asynchronous participation).

In terms of web seminars as professional development for literacy teachers and researchers, and the focus of GCLR, an increasing number of organizations and websites offer open access, quality professional development that have interactive or collaborative features (Bruder, 2013). For example, the Professional Development Builder provides downloadable modules on how to use primary sources for analyzing and teaching. The National Science Teachers Association (NSTA) Learning Center (learningcenter.nsta.org) features online 90-minute live seminars that allow participants to interact with various national experts, authors, and education specialists. The Center for Learning (www.centerforlearning.org) offers free webcasts, articles, and resources presented by renowned speakers. 0K2Ask® (www.teacherfirst.com/0K2Ask.cfm) provides sessions for self-directed teacher professional development and exploration. Yet, as we have articulated above, although these are OER, it remains uncertain how these web seminars support the pedagogical practices of educators. Further, from our search, we have not seen scholarship that addresses sustained quality web seminars as both OER and OEP.

Global populations in increasing numbers are seeking out "on demand" knowledge related to their jobs/careers (van Dam, 2012). We suggest the same is true of literacy researchers

and educators. Yet, in our search of the literature, we found that the large majority of the studies locate online delivery and design almost exclusively within the context of classroom disciplinary learning (see Garcia & Hooper, 2011; Karchmer, Mallette, Kara-Soteriou, & Leu, 2005; Lukinbeal & Allen, 2007; Morrison, 2010), commercial gain (Berg, 2008), and business training models (van Dam, 2012). Further, little, if any, research exists on a study of how web seminars or webinars inform and impact a learning audience. More specifically, we found no research in the area of sustained open-access web seminars that focus around a discipline, in particular, literacy. Our search found that organizations offer webinars, but are not sustained in idea or mission (IRA, 2010).

Research about how participation in web seminars—especially those designed to support professional development, that are sustained, focused around a mission and goal—is timely and necessary (Albers, Pace, & Brown, 2013), and can offer insights into open education resources that are high quality, interactive, and collaborative. Further, research in this area may offer new possibilities for literacy research and practices by the very nature that they transcend boundaries (e.g., time, space, geography, populations) that otherwise might represent barriers (e.g., cost, travel, time commitment). Further, to our knowledge, we know of few studies that investigate the role of OER as professional development or its impact. To this end, a study of an OER project that supports practical ideas, or OEP, is warranted and necessary to understand to what extent OER-OEP offer an alternative approach to professional development that maintains quality and contextualized instruction for educators. And even more critical is the theory that underpins these resources and the practices they embody.

GCLR as OPDP

Figure 2. GCLR model of Open Professional Development and Practices Resource

We position GCLR as both an OER and OEP, but with a unique focus on professional development, or what we call an OPDP, Open Professional Development and Practices resource, a project that draws from the best of Open Educational Resources and Open Education and Practice. That is, as an OPDP resource, professional development relies on access to open resources, but GCLR adds the professional development component that applies to practices, both research and teaching. (Figure 2). As an open access resource that values pedagogy and practices, GCLR has four critical dimensions to support professional development: 1) Theory Informs Practice; 2) Willing Participation; 3) Sustainability; and 4) Interactivity and Interaction. While these are our initial thoughts around this model, at the moment of this writing, OPDP reflects these dimensions, and recognizes the contributions of OEP and OER as critical resources in professional development. As viewed through the model, GCLR as an OPDP is on-going and represented by parallel circles, with OER and OEP running across the four dimensions and draws from both OEP and OER characteristics: all are open access, offer resources for learning, and OEP, like GCLR, focuses on practice. Within the OPDP model, the focus is on *open educational resources, practices*, and *professional development*. *Open educational resources* run as a thread through the GCLR model of OPDP. We draw from UNESCO's definition (2002) to position GCLR as an open-access resource for those with Internet access, delivered through information and communication technologies, and with no commercial purpose or gain. GCLR, however, does situate itself within a definable theory (critical literacy), and as an open resource, is tailored towards those interested in classroom ideas and research grounded in this theory. Open educational practice also runs as a thread through OPDP. We draw from Luke & Freebody (1999)'s concept of teaching as a set of *practices* that are actually "*done* -- performed, negotiated, and achieved in everyday classroom and community contexts, rather unlike psychological skills, schemata, competencies, and so forth" (http://www.readingonline.org/research/lukefreebody.html). By *professional development*, we draw from Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos (2009) to mean that professional development is an externally-provided professional resource that contributes to educators' and researchers' on-going learning with intent to change their instructional and/or research practice to support student learning. Although GCLR might be perceived as a "one off" model of PD if someone attends only one seminar, we argue otherwise. With it's grounding in theory and participants' choice to attend one or all seminars linked by theory, GCLR does not reflect the "drive-by workshop" (Wei, et al.). We also suggest that the four dimensions situate GCLR clearly within effective PD models—again, defined by Wei et al.-- and suggest the critical importance of situated, sustained, and interactive PD.

We now turn to each of the dimensions of this model of professional development, and present data that we have collected and analyzed across the life of the project to highlight these dimensions.

Dimensions of GCLR as OPDP

Theory Informs Practice

In order to be transformative, theory must inform practice which, in turn, informs theory. Short, Harste, and Burke (1996) argue that theory guides the decisions educators make and which comprise their teaching practices. For educators, it requires conscious commitment to further learning, and understanding of how that learning can better serve their students. For us, the lynchpin in the success of GCLR as an OPDP

is a commitment to the theory that guides decisions around GCLR, and actions that we take to reflect on GCLR as an OPDP. Since online professional development is increasingly becoming the "norm" for educators, especially with budget-strapped school districts that require on-going learning (Kohl, 2012), states like Ohio offer, in lieu of face-to-face seminars, "high quality seminars" "at a reasonable cost" (p. 48). The focus of these seminars was to provide a "means of increasing skills and knowledge that were broad-reaching and geographically neutral" (Kohl, p. 49). For us, seminars centered on "increasing skills and knowledge" are a-theoretical, and that the taught skills and knowledge often are left uninterrogated especially in terms of practice, contexts and populations of students. Further, professional development in this case is driven, in part, by consumerism. Low-cost professional development will be attractive to teachers because of financial considerations, and not necessarily because of the content.

As stated in GCLR's mission/aims page, "As an Internet-based project, GCLR is grounded in critical literacy…," GCLR as an OPDP adheres closely to this theory, and recognizes that "diverse, multiple and global perspectives are vital resources for changing consciousness around literacy research and practice" (http://globalconversationsinliteracy.wordpress.com/gclr-mission-and-goals/). In terms of resources, practices, and professional development, GCLR makes intentional decisions about speakers, their interest in critical pedagogy, and how the design of the seminar affords participants opportunity to ask questions of the scholar, and other audience members. Careful selection of presenters and their work are critical decisions made by the GCLR team when considering the link between theory and practice. To illustrate: Each of the speakers presents her/his theory of learning alongside ideas for practice that leads to social action. Thus, Allan Luke presented his four resources model, and followed this with examples of how Canadian teachers were taking this model up in their practice. Hilary Janks discussed the four orientations of critical literacy, and shared how they could be implemented into practice by looking at bottled water as a social issue. Audience members responded to these ideas in the context of their own practices,

We argue that GCLR is grounded theoretically, with speakers addressing issues around research and pedagogy, and that, therefore, participants understand this project as an on-going space of learning, and not just a "one-off" presentation by a scholar. GCLR is online professional development in which participants are, as they themselves have explained, "very interested in learning more…" so much so that "[They'll] be back…." For us, effective online professional development must live the theory that guides its mission and aims, be generative and situated, and design choices around the project's theory.

Willing Participation

Another dimension of an effective professional development project is that participants willingly take part in professional development. Unlike traditional PD that mandates educators to attend and which is often decontextualized from the participants' specific needs and interests, educators value choice in professional development that is situated in their own experiences (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). GCLR supports the desire to learn through an array of resources that are self-directed, and educators willingly participate.

In our review of interview, survey, and chat data, we have found that several characteristics comprise how and why GCLR attracts willing participation. First, GCLR web

seminars are disseminated through social networking sites including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and professional organization listservs. Those interested in GCLR willingly participate in project announcements, responding with their thoughts, "Looks like a great line-up [of speakers]!" "Wow, what an amazing slate of speakers this year--GCLR is becoming a must-see! Congratulations!" As a "go to" site for professional development in critical literacy, participants attend willingly. Second, through interviews, participants identified engagement in discussions with others across the world, open access, and disciplinary knowledge as reasons why they willingly participated in GCLR seminars. One participant valued the invitation to participate in conversations with others across the globe: "To unite people of varying opinions and philosophical backgrounds. I think it's a very noble quest to invite. I love the invitation so nobody is forced to do it. So you're inviting teachers to join in in the conversations." One participant shared, "I think, [GCLR seminars] affirm my knowledge of certain aspects of literacy. It's also just as empowering to know that there are teachers out there fed up with the whole assessment." Another participant, an educator, valued the opportunity to share an educational experience with her son who was studying to be a special education teacher: "I have a son who is just starting to learn about being a special ed teacher, so I told him about it, and I thought [GCLR] would be good for him too. So my son and I watched it together which was pretty cool." She continued to share the importance of GCLR's open access as a space to learn: "So, that's another big benefit. Most graduate courses aren't open to a junior in college [her son] getting a teaching degree, so it was kind of cool that anybody at any level of education could get involved in [these seminars]." Third, audiences willingly participate because of the speakers and their topics:

> I am very interested in critical literacy and in research that is transformative. Personally, I grew up very middle class, Caucasian, and in a homogenous population, community and school. My teaching experiences with marginalized groups of students…is where my passion lies. I saw that [Hilary Janks] was a speaker, and obviously her interests aligned with marginalized groups and [I wanted to know] what goes on in that area [South Africa].

Fourth, GCLR provides participants with learning that is self-directed, accessible, transformative, and life long. As a teacher of literacy and drama, one participant shared that she was "a big fan of the presenters, so that was a treat to see both of them presenting and sharing ideas. I just had time, certainly, but the biggest thing is that always I'm a life long learner, so I'm interested in always connecting." Another participant particularly discussed how GCLR seminars offered expertise that helped her find her "niche" and contribute to the scholarship of literacy:

> I taught for eleven years. I'm a firm believer that learning never ends and, if something strikes me as interesting, then I should jump at that opportunity, especially with something that is accessible, free, and fits into my schedule. So why not? I also am embarking on this journey of growing as a professional myself, and I need to find where my niche is. I really respect the individuals in the field that have the experience and have that knowledge. I hopefully will find that little niche where I'm going to fit into this big area.

These examples highlight how GCLR, as an on-going OPDP, supports participants' self-directed learning in which they willingly participate with others to engage in literacy discussions, feature speakers whose beliefs align with their own, and who see the seminars as contributing to their life-long learning which may lead to a transformation of their beliefs and/or practices.

Sustainability

Sustainability--as viewed through relevance, quality, and flexibility--is the third dimension of GCLR as an OPDP. Hunzicker (2010) argues that "the most effective professional development processes for academics need to be ongoing, supportive, job-embedded, instructionally focused, and collaborative — and that to be effective and authentic, professional development must be seamlessly integrated with the activities of the academic" (as cited in Higgins & Harreveld, 2013, p.190). Because of the voluntary nature of attendance and participation in GCLR seminars, it is more likely that these seminars align with participants' school and university professional development goals for educators. Educators in schools generally are required to do PD to receive credit, and, certainly, teacher educators/researchers are expected to maintain a robust research and scholarly agenda, of which PD is one aspect. GCLR offers a letter of attendance for educators to document their fulfillment of their PD requirement. For speakers, these presentations can be added to their curriculum vitas (CV), are publicized through the GCLR website and YouTube channel (which attracts a global audience), provides them an opportunity to share their new thinking, and (for some) helps them improve their skills in presenting in blended learning environments.

Other areas that contribute to sustainability are funding, support, and quality assurance (Nikoi & Armellini, 2012), to which we add "flexibility." In previous sections, we have discussed the importance of the on-going component of this project, and here wish to emphasize that the seminars, by nature of their quality and flexibility, are critical to participants. Speakers and participants both noted that issues of quality drive consideration of the extent to which a project is a "vital" and relevant space that brings together people with common interests. The quality of speakers and range of topics provides participants with choices as to which of the seminars suits their experiences, background, and teaching. Speakers are invited based upon their research and commitment to the topic (in this case, critical literacy and education issues), which makes GCLR a more sustainable venue for wider audiences. GCLR covers a wider range of topics related to literacy practices and learning from L2 literacy practices to multimodal literacy practices. Thus, audiences can widen their knowledge to various topics and learn from each other. To ensure the quality of seminars, the GCLR research team schedules a "practice" session with the speaker. Practice sessions provide a degree of assurance that the seminar goes smoothly, and that any technical problems that may emerge (always a concern in virtual teaching and learning) are ironed out in advance. Speakers express necessity of the practice session in their pre-seminar interviews, and use this practice session as an opportunity to confirm everything they need for the live seminar.

In previous sections, we discussed the quality and value of online PD about which participants spoke. In post-seminar interviews, all speakers spoke positively about the quality of GCLR, and linked it to its democratizing and transformative potential, Some examples:

> "I think it is critical, I think it is democratizing, I think it's important, and I

> think it's the way of the future. It's democratizing in a sense that if [a speaker] someone knows is in Michigan, this person might never hear him speak, and [the speaker] would have no opportunity to speak to [this person]. That is important to me."
>
> "I think [GCLR] is absolutely vital. I think all of the challenges that we're talking about have to be on our agenda as problems to be solved. I think that it's the most viable way to democratize education and to preserve the possibilities for real education because public education is being so corporatized, privatized, controlled. It's in these spaces that parents, teachers, and kids will have some possibility to fight back."
>
> "I think [GCLR] is a great idea. Your use of social media would be an interesting way of seeing how people who come [to these seminars] hang together across nations, not just individually, and what kind of common interests they have. Because you have a curriculum in mind when you meet these people, [it is would be interesting to see] how participants might connect with them in ways that have them act differently or think differently."

As we found, key themes regarding the quality of online professional development relate to its relevance, and its near-seamless integration into educators' everyday working lives. That these seminars are dialogic and open access supports a democratizing experience, one that may transform the way in which participants "act differently or think differently."

In addition to quality, issues of flexibility are very important to the success of GCLR. Wiley (2006) argues that in order to sustain an OER, participants must be able to find ways to continuously use and reuse these open resources. We agree, and also suggest that to sustain an online project, there needs to be great flexibility in its design and its use and reuse. In terms of its design, we found that flexibility in viewing is important to speakers and participants, whether it is from a desktop, laptop or mobile device. "On the go" professional development viewed through mobile devices enables participants who may be on the road to participate from their smart phones or tablets. Unlike in face-to-face conference and/or professional development sessions where question/answer sessions or follow-up conversations are held after the presentation, in live seminars, participants can ask questions at the moment that a presenter makes a point, and through the chat feature, engage in "discursive asides" (Albers, Pace, & Brown, 2013), or side conversations that audience members have in the moment around a speaker's point. Another aspect of flexibility is that speakers can deliver their talk from anywhere in the world, from home or while traveling. In turn, audience members can view seminars from the comfort of their home by themselves or with colleagues, or click on the Blackboard app on their phones/iPad and watch. Although time zones present challenges, seminars are scheduled on Sunday, flexibly between 11:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. (Eastern time/USA) to accommodate speakers in their area of the world (e.g., Great Britain, South Africa, Hong Kong, Australia). One speaker remarked in a post-seminar interview that "The nice thing about this kind of media is that we are in our own home. We didn't have to travel with a lot of expense and effort, and we communicated with a lot of people in a lot of places so I think it is very good use of the media." Another increasingly significant aspect of flexibility in terms of its use and reuse is the launching of the GCLR YouTube channel. In six months, over 6000 people have viewed its seminars, or

approximately 1000/month. With time zones a challenge, archived seminars provide a needed flexibility for global audiences. In a recent study with Korean teachers of English, Odo et al. (2014) found archived seminars to be of great value to non-native English participants. They were able to rewind and view the seminar again in its entirety, and could translate English at their own pace. One of the participants remarked about flexibility in terms of pacing, convenience in watching multiple times, and translation:

> Actually there is not really a difficulty in watching archived seminars. I think it would be harder if I participated in a live seminar. After all, live sessions need a time limitation for me, and it is hard to catch up once I lost the flow. This one, I can watch whenever I want, repeatedly. Also, I don't think I ever participate in social interactions, such as chattings, even in live seminars. So for me, the liveness doesn't really matter.

Another participant commented on the challenges for her to read the PowerPoint slides and listen to the presentations in English:

> [Due to the quality of the sound], I stopped the archived web seminar and listened one more time. It is usually difficult to read and listen simultaneously. Reading PowerPoints while pausing the screen helped me understand the web seminar better. I don't think current Korean teachers would be able to fully understand the contents only by listening. I think the subtitles are necessary for Korean teachers because they feel more comfortable with reading than listening. If they attend a live web seminar, they cannot pause the video and no subtitles are supported.

In projects that are global in nature, and especially in consideration of non-native English speaking participants, archived seminars offer a flexible alternative to synchronous participation and professional development. Archived seminars can be used and reused to ensure greater understanding of a speaker's ideas.

Interactivity and Interaction

Wagner (1994) differentiates between interaction and interactivity. She suggested that "interaction functions as an attribute of effective instruction while interactivity functions as an attribute of instructional delivery systems" (p. 6). She further defines instructional interaction as "an event that takes place between a learner and learner's environment and its purpose is to respond to the learner in a way intended to change his or her behavior toward an educational goal" (p. 9). For us, both operate in a symbiotic relationship and play an important part in GCLR as an OPDP. In terms of design, Blackboard Collaborate, the delivery system, provides participants with features that allow for interaction: chat, emoticons, hand raising, symbols, and white board. Participants often use emoticons or hand claps to signal approval or connection to a point/statement made. Such features provide opportunities for interaction, especially for those who may feel nervous about writing in the chat area. For us, interaction is an essential component in any learning process as it has the potential to change a person's way of thinking and acting (Shannon, 2011). It is one of the key components of good pedagogy not only in face-to-face communication but also in synchronous/asynchronous online education because it is the fundamental process for knowledge acquisition and the development of both cognitive and physical skills (Baker, 1994). However, every interaction does not lead to increased learning. It has to be "meaningful

interaction" (Woo & Reeves, 2007, p. 15) in the sense that it has to promote active learning, and enable active facilitation and higher order knowledge skills (Muirhead & Juwah, 2004). Meaningful interaction is not just sharing personal opinions. Instead, the interaction must stimulate the learners' intellectual curiosity, engage them in productive instructional activities, and directly influence their learning (Woo & Reeves, 2007).

In GCLR, how do we know that meaningful interaction occurs? Or, how do we know whether interaction has affected learning? First, we know that learners communicate actively with various participants including speakers. The questions directed to the speakers are challenging. For example, one participant asked, "Dr. Street, what do you think about the international tests, such as PISA [Program for International Student Assessment], which try to assess through an autonomous model the literacy "skills" of children in developing countries in order to suggest certain policies?" In another web seminar, a question was directed to speaker Joyce King: "I would like for you to discuss why racism is not just an American problem but a global one." Other participants asked follow-up questions, "As a future educator, how do we go about rewiring young children's mindset on race, when they are raised in a home that disregards race?" While speakers cannot always address questions that arise in the moment, participants take it upon themselves to initiate an interactive discussion around such questions through discursive asides (Albers, Pace, & Brown, 2013). Examples:

> P1: I ALWAYS use the term "enslaved Africans" to humanize my ancestors and to never discount their experience and hard free labor…and I don't allow my students to use the word for the same reason.
>
> P2: How do we bring white educators to this critical conversation? There is a strong resistance and focus on colorblindness in white educators, mainly. How do we respond to the question (of white educators) [that] "we cannot simply talk about the 'victim' story, but move forward?"
>
> P3: The after effects of colonialism are still felt in many countries in the New World.
>
> P4: Yes, there is so much more that could be said but time is insufficient to address the profoundness of the issue. There is racism in Asia, Africa, Australia, Canada, South America and so on. I would be happy to discuss the topic further with any of our [university] students and faculty.

Meaningful interactions and register situate participants' experiences as central in the above exchange. P4 identifies racism as a "complex" issue, and encourages further discussion with others who might wish to come to a different understanding. P2 invites participants to consider issues of pedagogy as it relates to white educators. In terms of register, P1 capitalizes "ALWAYS" to demonstrate a commitment to how particular words shape perspective. Interactivity allows for meaningful interaction to occur; participants interact with the features of Blackboard Collaborate (e.g., chat, white board) to engage in conversation with each other. For interactions to be meaningful to participants' thinking and practices, these interactions must be situated within the experiences of the participants, driven by the need to know and understand issues, and invite them to think and act differently.

A second indicator for meaningful interaction in GCLR seminars is that participants may face inevitable conflict situations that arise during discussions: During

one seminar, a participant commented: “About CCSS [Common Core State Standards, a model widely adopted or adapted in the United States]: It is the antithesis of teachers as professionals who fixate belief through inquiry, and builds on an unprofessional stance that teachers (not functioning as professionals) fixate belief through authority. It strikes me as horribly unethical and morally repugnant.” Another participant responded: “In the test-crazed world of today, many questions kids are not asked on the tests really show if they understand strategies, not if they're readers. Is there a way to prepare them for that which does not damage them as learners?” In such discursive asides, participants engage in meaningful, and at times, tension-filled interactions, by asking critical policy questions that address the conflicts around the status quo.

In spite of the conflicts that are brought up, participants actively negotiate internally and socially to solve those situations. One seminar generated many thoughts regarding the CCSS as participants commented that it restricts teacher and student creativity and is prescriptive and predictable. One participant responded, “I think interpretation has a lot to do with it. I taught CCSS last year and I do not feel that it stifled my creativity (any more than any standards have).” Across these discursive asides, participants do arrive at some common understanding about the issue: “I agree. This is our 2nd year and our administration seems to still support creativity within the standards.”

Meaningful interaction also occurs between participant and speaker, both through the talk and the question/answer session that follows:

> “Your work has made quite an impact on my own work. Thank you [Dr. Cambourne].”
>
> “This was a thought provoking talk. I've learned a lot from this series of lectures--and I value the interactive format. Thanks again.”
>
> “I really enjoyed Dr. Cambourne's ideas as well as everyone's in the chat!! As a soon-to-be teacher, I really enjoyed learning from all of you!

As a space of interactivity and interaction, GCLR as an OPDP hosts events with the intention to transform behavior and perspective towards educational issues. With open access to seminars that invite interaction, participants learn with each other, from each other, and through each other. That is, sustained on-going quality seminars led by recognized experts, with opportunities for global participation and interactions, have the potential to shift perspectives, and move from discussion to individual or collective action.

Discussion and Conclusion

With Internet access increasing at lightning pace, professional development in OER or other online venues is inevitable. Online access and participation will become the new face-to-face “platform” to shift educators’ practices and their perspectives. In this section, we take up the question, so what is significant about participation in web seminars, and why should we take up the challenge to develop strong OPDP projects grounded in theory and pedagogy?

First, boundaries around where learning occurs are blurred. Schools and universities no longer are the sole owners of learning and knowledge. Professional conferences no longer hold propriety over hosting internationally recognized speakers. Open educational resources, massive online open access courses (MOOCs), online universities, online degrees, online elementary, middle and high schools,

YouTube, and the Internet, in general, continually feed people's thirst for on demand learning. What is in question is to what degree do these resources offer the kind of quality assurance and authority that people wish in their learning? We suggest that GCLR, as a theoretically grounded and sustained project, offers quality in terms of speakers, and of interaction. That is, participants attend this OPDP because of who the speakers are, to interact with others to share ideas, to get pedagogical ideas for their own teaching, and to participant in a common community that supports holistic and critical literacy education and research.

Second, in this paper, we have identified four key dimensions of GCLR as an online professional development and practice (OPDP) project that we argue are necessary for effective professional development: must be grounded in theory which informs practice, has willing participation, has sustainability, and allows for interactivity and interaction. In the discussions around OER and OEP, we want to emphasize the importance of the pedagogical implications when OER are meaningfully designed, organized, and delivered. As educators ourselves, we understand the need for professional development that is relevant and meaningful. However, in a world where knowledge is immediate and expected, it is critical that among all of the available choices for online educational resources that OPDP projects like GCLR are available at no cost, and are of high quality. With so many organizations and companies offering professional development seminars, in our review of these seminars, few are offered at no cost and of high quality (as defined throughout this paper) and even fewer are grounded theoretically with identifiable mission and aims. We argue that for online professional development to be effective and meaningful, it is critical that the content and the speakers are aligned within a set of beliefs based on theory, research, and practice. It is through beliefs that practices can be transformed, and learning made more meaningful.

Willing participation also adds to the effectiveness of online professional development. As adult learners mature, they become increasingly self-directed (Ellinger, 2004). That is, they are self-motivated to learn, change, and improve (Ellinger, 2004, p.160). Online access to professional learning becomes an integral and central process in their lives (Roberson, 2005). Willing participation in GCLR web seminars accounts for participants' aspiration of learning and professional development, and participants tend to perform in an active, responsible, and determined manner. Based on their motivation for self-directed learning, participants' willing participation is essential to maximize their learning, to lead their professional development, and to satisfy their needs as life-long learners. Bayar (2014) argues that teacher perspectives and voices are important educational resources and the key components of effective professional development (p. 320). In this regard, some participants indicated that taking part in web seminars enabled them to discuss and question, extend their knowledge, apply their meaning to their own contexts, and establish local and global connections around issues of education. More than providing direct skills and resources for teaching, GCLR provides avenues to inquiry through their willing participation; this then extends their perspectives.

We also argue that sustainability requires both quality and flexibility in both the delivery format and the content of online professional development. Speakers and participants appreciate that they can present and view, respectively, from anywhere, and that they can use a range of devices, standard and mobile, through which to participate (e.g., smart phones,

tablets, desktops). Educators will continue to participate in professional development when seminars are relevant, engage them in highly interactive discussions with global others, and offer flexibility in terms of synchronous and asynchronous engagement. Especially in a world with hundreds of languages, flexibility in online professional development design delivered in English is crucial for those who speak languages other than English. Archived seminars that are open access resources provide just this alternative, and opens up PD to larger and more global audiences.

As an open access professional development and practices project, GCLR values the pedagogical knowledge that accompanies the expertise that a speaker brings to the seminars. Not only must educators have PD opportunities that are open access, but ones that position them as knowledgeable professionals sharing insights, strategies and ideas with each other. GCLR has, as part of its design, the interactive chat and question/answer sessions following a speaker's presentation. Such a design affords participants opportunities to discuss ideas, raise questions, and posit perspectives with both the speaker and with other local and global participants. Discursive asides (Albers, Pace, & Brown, 2013), as shown in the discussion around racism, allow for both theoretical and pedagogical ideas to emerge naturally and with immediacy. Participants pose questions while others respond with ideas and thoughts about an issue. Further, the live question/answer session after the presenter's talk further builds upon the pedagogy reflected in the talk. For Hilary Janks, the issue of bottled water becomes a way to build inquiry into a literacy curriculum. For Allan Luke and Peter Freebody (1999), the four resources model becomes a way for educators to consider language not only as a linguistic resource but also as a critical discourse around which values and beliefs are expressed. This knowing provides educators/participants with ways of rethinking how they teach language, and ultimately how to transform their teaching practices.

Online professional development projects that feature international scholars whose work is grounded in critical literacy and learning are vital if we are to fulfill the promise of education to transform and make better practices around literacy instruction and research. Participants whose perspectives engender a sense of social responsibility to educate children in equitable ways find spaces such as GCLR encouraging. They find and communicate openly with like-minded others, ask questions, and seek out new ideas that will reshape their practices. Critical spaces like GCLR respect the hard work that educators do, and serve not only to maintain the professionalism of teachers, but also to ensure a meaningful learning experience for children across the world. As Joyce King (2013) stated in her web seminar, "It's in these spaces that parents, teachers, and kids will have some possibility to fight back."

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