A Recipe for Literacy: Making Meaning Through Cake

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Within this article, we explore cake artistry as a means of demonstrating a process of meaning-making (Starratt, 1996). We contend that the cakes themselves are tactile examples of literacy events (Heath, 1982) due to the embodiment and relationality present within their design process (Johnson et al., 2020). This article discusses two unique cakes that explore elements of literacy related to storytelling, personal reflection, and emotional expression. We, the authors, strive to position literacy, as explored through cakes, within a post-humanist perspective and provide an opportunity for authentic engagement and humanized/ing actions with meaning-making (Beucher et al., 2019; Garrett et al., 2019; Perry & Medina, 2015). We hope that this article will encourage our readers to think about literacy differently as well as what it means to be "literate" within different professions.

Literacy in Our Household

Thoughts about literacy are constantly on my mind as a developing scholar in the field. Both my prior teaching experiences and my graduate work have been, primarily, grounded within the realms of English Language Arts and literacy development (Campbell, 2021). However, this article is unique from my earlier scholarship in that it is not specifically about literacy learning within a classroom setting. Rather, this article is working to present embodiment and diverse forms of meaning-making as rich areas of possibility for literacy learning (Perry et al., 2013). Indeed, the lived experiences of professionals can offer the opportunity to explore learning environments as lived, responsive, and reflective spaces (Hooks, 1995; Irwin et al., 2004; Springgay & Irwin, 2005). My fiancé, Josh, on the other hand, does not have the same relationship with literacy that I do; if I bring it up in relation to what I worked on that day. If I speak to him about how I feel literacy can be broken into many complex practices, and about how I primarily see literacy as a

meaning-making process undertaken through both embodiment, relationality, and emergence (Burnett & Merchant, 2020) his eyes will glaze over, and he will revert to nodding encouragingly (which is appreciated!). For myself, literacy can come to involve moments of "facial expression, movement of bodies in space, body posture and shape, gesture, and words" (Pascoe, 2002, p. 66). These embodied and relational moments can be applied when they emerge as meaning-making strategies across contexts (Medina et. al., 2021). Such conceptualizations of literacy move it, as a concept and practice, into new spaces. Within some of my other research, this movement is from the page to the stage and in the context of this article it is in relation to cake artistry as a meaning making practice. Josh also does not read for pleasure very often, due to being immensely busy as a pastry chef, which, for him, meant that he felt he was not engaging with literacy on a regular basis. However, I saw an opportunity to work with him to conceive of his engagement with literacy differently after seeing many of the incredible cakes he designs in his profession. From a scholarly perspective, I believe that his cakes demonstrate a process of meaning-making created in relation to his clients and co-workers that creates a literacy experience in his day-to-day life (Starratt, 1996). I would go so far as to claim that this meaning is a tactile example of literacy events (Heath, 1982) due to the elements of collective creation (Lang, 2002) present within the processes of cake artistry. As you will see throughout this article, cakes can be used as a means of storytelling, reflection, and emotional expression. Through such practices, Josh, as the cake artist, is developing an increased capacity to become a more effective text user through multiple literacies (Hansen, 2009), while also challenging himself to consider the meaning of literacy more critically (Shenfield, 2015) by engaging within various reflective practices (Tassi, 1995).

Since cake artistry is such a hands-on and physical activity, conceiving of literacy through its practices necessitates considerations of both embodiment and relationality (Johnson et al., 2020). This will position literacy, as discussed here, within a post-humanist perspective by emphasizing embodiment within literacy as a way to assist learners, and practitioners, by providing an opportunity for authentic engagement and humanized/ing actions (Beucher et al., 2019; Garrett et al., 2019; Perry & Medina, 2015). I will extend this post-human perspective to also include envisioning cake artistry as a meaning-making tool, as a new kind of transformative meaning-making encounter (Lenters & Whitford, 2020). Ultimately, this article was written to demonstrate processes of meaning-making that are present in an industry not often explored by academics as well as a desire to engage with literacy in a creative, enjoyable, and meaningful way. Over the course of this article, two unique cakes will be highlighted that explore elements of literacy related to storytelling, reflection, and emotional expression. This article will discuss how meaning is communicated through cake design, the process of cake design, including how the design is an interpretative process, and the personal reflections on the two different cakes by Josh; the pastry chef who designed and created them. We hope that this article will encourage our readers to think about the recipe and ingredients of literacy differently as well as what it means to be "literate" within different professions.

Seeing Literacy Events Within Cake

In order to position cake design as a form of literacy development, it is important to understand the origins of and impetus for *literacy events*. The term literacy event refers to moving literacy off of the page and into an event (Heath, 1982). Lenters (2018) discusses the advent of the term literacy event as significant in that it provided a "here and now" (p. 153) approach to literacy instruction that also "provided a common unit of analysis, allowing for a

comparison of literacy practices across a variety of contexts" (p. 154). Importantly, however, it must be noted that *literacy events*, as Heath (1982) envisioned them, are problematic from a relational perspective due to their often "patterned, rule-bound (nature which) sits uncomfortably with notions of liveliness, affect, fluidity, and emergence" (Burnett & Merchant, 2020, p. 47). A way in which to address such criticism is by moving from a literacy event to *literacy-as-event* which "promotes an expansive, reflective, and imaginative engagement with literacy practices that aligns with relational thinking" (p. 46). Seeing literacy-as-events within the practices of cake artistry positions the pastry chef as the primary meaning-maker, as they interpret design requests from their clients reflective of a certain story, emotion, or intention (Hansen, 2009). This is a challenging request for any professional as it layers the meaning-making process within a series of complexities often requiring an approach that is more critical and informed (Shenfield, 2015). Therefore, envisioning literacy-as-event within the pastry arts has the potential to create more holistic and balanced literacy experiences by opening the conversation of "what is literacy?" into new previously unexplored and creative spaces (Marco, 2015).

So, what does this mean within a pastry arts setting? Well, in the early stages of design, a pastry chef is a text analyst who goes about interpreting their design from a series of written instructions, visual prompts, and dialogue with clients and co-workers. So, even though Josh, as the pastry chef, has a perception of not having time for literacy in a traditional sense he is still approaching literacy-as-event through his profession by creating meaning through conversations and dialogue relevant to the everyday life of his profession (Starratt, 1996). However, prior to any connections between these notions and the post-human we wish to highlight the cakes themselves and discuss how they generate an "inventive space" within the bakery (Daniels & Downes, 2014). This "inventive space" is important for literacy since it creates "a highly engaging participatory (art) form that (is) capable of generating rich opportunities for learning" (Dunn, 2016, p. 127). We see the way in which a pastry chef communicates through their craft as generating such an "evolving multimodal communicative landscape" in ways that are multimodally literate (Whitelaw, 2017).

A Recipe for Literacy in the Kitchen: Cake Artistry

Personal Reflection Through Cake – Pride

The first cake we are discussing holds deep personal meaning for both Josh and myself, as we are members of the LGBTQQIP2SAA community. This cake is a celebration of Pride undertaken through our own unique positionality within the LGBTQQIP2SAA community.

Figure 1

Pride Cakes

The intended message of this cake relates to breaking free of normality and letting one's true colors shine through. At one angle, in the raised cake on the far left, you will notice quite a traditional look with a concrete style finish. Whereas, at another angle, in the lower cake beside it, it is possible to see the colors of the pride flag beginning to make an appearance. Reasons for this are also quite personal as both Josh and I have only come out in the last few years. We hid who we were in order to comply with expectations for many years. We are not alone in this as many members of our community live in the shadows of their own identities out of fear or insecurity. Both Josh and I remember those feelings well and that is in spite of us both coming from very supportive and loving families – something which we know makes us incredibly fortunate.

As part of literacy-as-event, this pride cake allowed a distinctive and individual expression of self in a way that was true to us, while enabling new possibilities for us in relation to our own understanding of community. As much as we had both tried to hide things, we were not masters of deception, and people, in both of our lives, were not surprised by our coming out. To their credit though, everyone waited until we were ready to talk about it, another element which we are both very grateful for. This cake tells that story while also visually showing that we were both not super immersed in our community at the time. Certain colors, or symbols, from the updated pride flag, are missing and it was promoted as an LGBTQ cake rather than an LGBTQQIP2SAA one. Both Josh and I are introverted and even once we were out, we did not engage with the community very often.

The second cake on the far right, with the more detailed pride flag showing, is meant to symbolize the growth we have both undertaken in recent years by highlighting our community more holistically and including as many members of the community as possible. Josh even

compiled his own independent research to ensure that his design was as authentic as possible. The cake incorporates particular techniques, like Faultline design, and both cakes are styled entirely with buttercream. As Josh reflects on the creative process which went into these cakes, the second one being created a year after the first, he remarks about how much fun it was to work with all the colors and how he enjoyed the freedom he had in designing the cake as the only gay member of staff at his bakery.

Josh sees these cakes as a way of communicating his identity through his profession. He hopes that if a young gay person looks at this cake it will help them to realize that even though it can be hard and overwhelming to come out, that life is so much better on the outside of the closet. Being able to see "literacy-as-events" within the modality of cake artistry helps to position the pastry chef, and the client viewing the cake, as meaning-makers, as they interpret designs and share stories, emotions, and intentions (Hansen, 2009). Such thinking also allows for considerations surrounding notions of emergence to enter into conversation with what counts as literacy (Burnett & Merchant, 2020, p. 47). The term literacy "has come to mean many things; it is not just being able to read and write" (Burton, 2017, p. 40). It is clear, through recent literacy scholarship, that there are multiplicities of meaning present within an ever-expanding paradigm of literacy. Within this wider paradigm, I find myself defining literacy as a lifelong process of communication and meaning-making through our interconnected and embodied relations. The relationship of literacy to particular temporal and physical spaces, and an acknowledgment of that within creative processes, such as cake design, "create learning environments, or opportunities for reflection, designed to foster the complex process of becoming literate" similar to literacy within other kinds of communities (Burwell & Lenters, 2015, p. 208). Cake artistry is an effective way to explore differences as opportunities, meaning that its practices can lead learners to develop an understanding of literacy that is embodied and experienced differently depending on personal, environmental, and educational contextual factors. It is in these moments of difference and exploration within the context of a community that we can begin to give voice to what constitutes an "experience of literacy" in a less traditional sense (Burwell & Lenters, 2015, p. 202).

Storytelling Through Cake – A Tale of Two Ghosts

Figure 2

Haunted Wedding Cake – Front View and Topper

This cake holds special meaning to both Josh and I, as it was the wedding cake for two of our best friends. The design of this cake is based entirely on a children's storybook that was written as a love letter for the bride and groom. As you may be able to infer from the design, the story was a tale of two shy ghosts who were very timid and did not know how to scare people. When they find one another, they give each other confidence, become more complete versions of themselves, and ended up falling in love. Both the story itself and the art on the cake were written and designed by the groom specifically for the bride. As such, the couple has a deep personal connection to the material and while it possesses elements of fiction it is also communicating the truth and reality of their own story.

When Josh reflects upon this cake the first feeling which comes to mind is the honor he felt being invited to be a part of such a deeply personal narrative. Being able to tell this story in a new form, through a cake, is something which he will always remember. With that said, the process of designing this cake was a complex one since it involved a multistage process. Firstly, consultation was required since the couple had to identify elements of the cake design that they enjoyed or elements that they had on their wish list for incorporation. This is what led to the inclusion of the storybook pages (edges in orange on the sides), on the back of the cake since both of them deeply enjoyed reading. The quotes seen on these pages are the favorite quotes from the story that each of them identified. Beyond that incorporation, however, all the couple initially identified was that they wanted a small personal cutting cake based on the Halloween themes present in the storybook and its art design. This conversation led Josh to make a rough design, after having read the book in full, and having a discussion surrounding the couple's favorite elements. For the bride, this element was the moon featured on the front center of the

cake, and for the groom, it was a three-way tie between the ghosts, the pumpkins, and the haunted trees. It was hard for the groom to settle on only one component since he had poured so much of himself into each element of the design. Nevertheless, Josh combined each of these elements in addition to designing the cake topper as a surprise element not discussed in the consultation. The 3D cake topper was made from foam clay so, while not edible, it is a component that can be kept forever as a memory of the couple's special day.

Stories such as this one can become literacy moments (Cowan & Albers, 2006) as the layers of characters, motivations, traits, and personalities are communicated through various mediums. Cake artistry can be viewed as a literacy practice in this context since it provides opportunities to develop identity and creativity (Daniels & Downes, 2014) while at the same time encouraging those involved to consider their own relationships with text beyond the text itself (Gallagher, 2015, p. 440). This cake, as an example, could be used to highlight the five elements of a good story. Using an improvisation exercise, viewers of the cake could create short stories that include location, relationship, conflict, heightening of the stakes, and resolution—or what they believe these factors to be based upon from provided stimuli. Allowing viewers to both dialogically discuss and embody their stories helps to develop a host of skills such as "fluency, comprehension, and oral reading confidence" (Peck & Virkler, 2006, p. 792) not possible without the cake as a visual prompt.

The Importance of Relationality

Literacy Through a Post-Human Perspective

Post-humanism, broadly defined, considers the interdependence of humans and nonhumans, of bodies, and of objects and entities (Johnson et al., 2020). Specifically of interest to me as a literacy scholar is how post-humanist thought places emphasis on bodies as sites of meaning-making since bodies are the way in which we experience existence and thus come to define, in large part, our lifeworld. The way in which we embody our existence, meaning the impact of what happens through, by, within, and to the material body defines the way in which we interact with the world (Johnson et al., 2020). Literacy, as a construct within this conceptualization of existence, bridges the mind with the body in such a way as to challenge traditional binary notions of a mind/body split (Johnson et al., 2020). In this way, literacy is neither a set of strictly cognitive skills, nor a socially constructed process of meaning-making, but, rather, a complex interrelation between the human and the more-than-human (Johnson et al., 2020). Each of these distinct experiences influences the other in a complex interrelation that shapes meaning-making (Johnson et al., 2020).

Post-humanism also speaks to literacy-focused research through its philosophical tendency to resist binaries (Kuby & Rowsell, 2017, p. 4). In so doing, post-humanism sees embodiment as more than just the object of the body itself but rather a site for meaning-making and pedagogical engagement (Johnson et al., 2020). Author Jane Bennett (2010) writes that "If we think we already know what is out there, we will almost surely miss much of it" (p. xv) and this speaks to the potential of post-humanism to revisit that which we once thought we understood when we begin to resist binaries. Post-humanism can offer us a way of exploring other ways of knowing, becoming, and doing literacies, as well as looking to other ways of thinking about and defining what counts as literacy both within and beyond schools (Kuby & Rowsell, 2017, p. 4). Creative modalities, such as cake artistry explored here, embrace the notion

of entanglement as it is seen within post-human thought (Barad, 2003) which means a braiding of knowing, becoming, and doing with both critical and creative thought and action (Bennett, 2001; Braidotti, 2013). This challenges our view of the literacy curriculum which tends to privilege traditional print-based literacies or mental conceptualizations of reading, writing, and teaching (Peck & Virkler, 2006). Such considerations are dangerous as they exclude elements of literacy learning within the personal, reflective, and emotional realms and do a disservice to our overall understanding of what it means to be "literate" (Nichols & Campano, 2017). Therefore, approaches like pastry arts can help to create opportunities for embodiment, critical engagement, and humanized/ing action beyond traditional texts (Beucher et al., 2019; Garrett et al., 2019; Perry & Medina, 2015).

When considering professionals, such as pastry chefs, it is important to see how they are making use of literacy in relation to the creation of opportunities for ongoing aesthetic encounters (Bennett, 2001). This is especially true of professions such as the pastry arts which rely on relationships and communication for success, making relationality key (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004; Latour, 2004). Over the past decade, literacy scholarship has increasingly moved towards notions of relationality. This shift, while being momentous in its own right, highlights how different notions of what it means to be "literate" can exist across time and place even today. Indeed, ideas relating to what it means to be "literate", are quite fluid within contemporary settings and expanded opportunities for meaning-making can add to this ongoing dialogue by considering literacy as a social practice rather than a static skill set (Harste, 2003; Marco, 2015). This idea of social practice is important since "instead of thinking about literacy as an entity (something you either have or don't have), thinking about literacy as social practice can be revolutionary" (Harste, 2003, p. 9). What aligns cake artistry with this construct of a social practice so strongly is that creativity, responsiveness, embodiment, and relationality are all present within the process of creating art through this medium. If storytelling and meaning-making through practices like cake artistry could be applied more directly in schools through professional programs perhaps there could also be more instances of genuine student wonder and creativity within the classroom (Daniels & Downes, 2014).

Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

English Language Arts (ELA) and literacy proficiency teachers are always looking for ways of developing literacy skills while also developing the capacities of students to understand complex "ways of knowing" (Vicars & McKenna, 2015, p. 421). While this article is not specifically about literacy learning within the classroom it does present embodiment, relationality, and diverse forms of meaning-making as rich areas of possibility for literacy learning (Perry, et. al., 2013). Indeed, the lived experiences of professionals, such as pastry chefs, can also offer the opportunity to explore learning environments through the perspective of a lived, responsive, and reflective lens of human experience through diverse forms of representation (Hooks, 1995; Irwin, et. al., 2004; Springgay & Irwin, 2005). If, as educators, we can come to see opportunities for literacy learning as existing in the world around us as opposed to something prescriptive we can provide more unique opportunities to our students for the growth of their agency within literacy classrooms (Daniels & Downes, 2014).

The examples of meaning-making that Josh provided from his kitchen highlight those rich and shared literacy environments in which discussions of both literacy skills and perceptions of literacy, can be explored well beyond the walls of a formal classroom. This is an important

consideration for teachers as the skills and content which we teach have to possess "value beyond success in school" (Newmann, et al., 2001, p. 14). This value should be explored in relation to professions that exist outside of the academy as ways of showing how any "purposeful social activity" can create an opportunity for literacy to flourish (Lenters & Whitford, 2018, p. 122). While we by no means expect all language teachers to take up baking in their spare time having conversations about literacy through different modalities has changed the way that Josh and I discuss the content at home. Rather than something only I do every day we now discuss literacy as something regularly occurring in each of our lives. We hope that our exploration has inspired you to try new recipes of literacy within your own future dialogues!

Acknowledgment

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