

Notes from the field

Hear directly from the people in the field working with SERP's school district partners.



Professor Catherine Snow of Harvard University is Director of Research for SERP's Boston Field Site

Q: What are the big changes from the current Word Generation in the new Word Generation materials we will be piloting with Massachusetts teachers in the 2011-12 school year? What issues are you exploring in this round of materials development?

Catherine Snow: The new Word Generation materials extend some of the features teachers and students love from the traditional materials: starting from an engaging dilemma, embedding academic words and useful world knowledge in background readings, and providing recurrent opportunities across content areas to use the words and build the relevant world knowledge. There are big differences though. First, we are developing a 4th grade version of the program, which of course introduces issues that are developmentally appropriate for younger children-- for example, 'is it a good idea to adopt wild animals as

pets?' and 'when should we follow advice from experts and when should we decide for ourselves about issues of safety and risk?' Second, for sixth graders we are deepening the learning opportunities by selecting topics that will extend over six weeks and that link to state content standards. For example, a social studies unit to be used during the study of the Roman Empire poses questions about whether the Pompeii residents were being sensible to live so near Vesuvius and whether gladiator fights should be allowed. Multiple texts that link to these issues, and also extend them to more contemporary concerns (why do people live in dangerous neighborhoods? should boxing be outlawed?) are presented to provide grist for argumentation and for writing about the questions.



Professor Jonathan Osborne of Stanford University is a Principal Investigator with SERP's Catalyzing Comprehension through Discussion and Debate Initiatives.

Q: What was the focus of the work you did with San Francisco teachers for a week this summer? Will your connection with these teachers continue?

Jonathan Osborne: This was the first workshop with the middle school teachers that we will be working with over the next two years. Five days seemed like a long time but it soon disappeared. The idea was to introduce the teachers to some of the current knowledge about the complexities of texts and the instructional practices that they might use. Starting with issues around scientific vocabulary, we explored the different types of words that we use in scientific language and how they pose challenges for students – particularly those words which are part of the academic lexicon and have multiple meanings. From this, we then went onto explore issues such as the lexical density of text and the way in which meaning in science is reliant on a variety of semiotic forms and visualizations. We then looked at strategies such as graphic organizers and foldables which would help students to extract and construct meaning.

All of this was really a prelude to the main focus of the week that was to look at how it was possible to approach scientific text in a way that would expose its inherent ambiguity, choices and omissions. This approach requires students and their teachers to consider alternative explanations for what the text might mean, explain why those might be justified and then engage in discussion and debate to evaluate the competing choices. For many, used to the idea that science texts are authoritative and cannot be questioned, this is a strange concept but we modelled the practice for them and they tried it out on each other. The real challenge comes when they try this practice out in the coming year and return to share their thoughts on their experience. This we will be doing in a series of four, one-day professional development workshops in the coming year. We all finished the week thinking that there is much more to scientific text than meets the eye!



Suzanne Donovan is SERP's Executive Director.

Q: The RISE Assessment, developed by SERP and ETS, has been used more widely in recent months. Could you please update us about this tool and how it is serving districts?

Suzanne Donovan: The RISE assessment has been several years in the making, but is now in a form and a format that is relatively easy for districts to use. Collaboratively designed by ETS and SERP to address the needs of the Boston Public Schools, the assessment is now being sought out by other districts. Baltimore City Schools recently administered the RISE to 10,000 middle school students. Feedback from our partner districts suggests the reports back to schools are highly valuable to teachers and administrators who for the first time have reading profiles for their middle school students. Teachers report, for example, having thought a student was just quiet when, in fact, she can't read. RISE reports can also point to a school-wide instructional problem. When students across the board are doing poorly on the morphology battery, for example, it's a pretty strong signal that the instructional program is not attending to the components of words, and the ways in which beginnings and endings change in different sentence constructions. And when students do well in narrative passages but poorly with authentic textbook passages, attention to academic language is in order.

RISE is a terrific example of the promise of a genuine research-practice partnership. ETS had the expertise and even many of the necessary items for the RISE. But the partnership was necessary in order to determine the form of the assessment that would satisfy the schools' needs, the length of time that could be provided, and the purposes for which the results would be used. With those things clarified,

the ETS team moved quickly. But there were many bumps in the road. The SERP team's close working relationship with BPS allowed for many rounds of improvement designed to make the results more usable, and user friendly. The next phase of work, strengthening the supports for schools and districts to use the assessment data well, is now under way.



Michelle Forman directs SERP's Internal Coherence Assessment and Protocol work.

Q: You are currently deeply involved with the Boston Public Schools as they make efforts to increase coherence throughout the district. How does this relate to your SERP work on internal coherence and current studies as a doctoral candidate at Harvard?

Michelle Forman: The SERP Internal Coherence work in Boston is at an exciting juncture right now. In the spring of 2011 the research team completed the IC assessment process in 11 schools, including elementary, middle, K-8, high school and one turnaround. After we compiled survey results into school-level IC profiles, we worked in collaboration with Boston CAO Irvin Scott and his team of Academic Superintendents to develop a Professional Development session to share profile data with principals from the IC schools. The PD also served to introduce school leaders to the concept of Internal Coherence, the various research literatures from which we draw, and the theory of school improvement that drives the project.

What I find most important about the Internal Coherence project, and the focus I will pursue in my doctoral work, is the delineation of Internal Coherence as a construct, or discrete body of practices, that can be assessed, articulated back to school leadership and faculty, and systematically

supported. The IC work is grounded in a developmental framework, so that IC profiles lead schools to think strategically, and continuously, about their next level of work. Presenting school and district leaders with a profile that locates them on a spectrum tied to a [theory of action](#) and a developmental rubric is an infinitely more actionable and more hopeful strategy than the traditional, abstract commentary about the state of a school's climate or culture.

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Patrick Hurley in SERP's first Teacher in Residence.

Q: What are your thoughts looking ahead as you start your year as SERP's first Teacher in Residence?

Patrick Hurley: I'm looking forward to supporting teachers and other instructional leaders who are participating in SERP's unique collaborative model for educational reform. Over the past 18 years as a classroom teacher, I've been fortunate to work with strong educational leaders; however I have felt frustrated by the pace at which the research of powerful and promising practices reached teachers like me. I look forward to being part of a movement that accelerates this process.

My role is to support San Francisco middle school teachers as they implement SERP's Word Generation program in their schools. At the same time, I get to collaborate with the researchers, curriculum designers and developers as we write the next version of Word Generation, building off of the lessons that we learn from working with students and teachers across the U.S. As SERP's teacher in residence, I have the responsibility to bring the classroom perspective to

this work. It is my hope that my contributions to this project could have some impact in the way that curriculum is developed, including addressing the concerns of classroom teachers whose voice has seldom been heard in much of educational reform.

I think I'm most looking forward to being in middle schools and learning from talented teachers across the city of San Francisco. Unfortunately, schools are not set up for teachers to easily visit each others' classrooms and learn from the talented teachers that surround us. As SERP's Teacher in Residence, I will have the opportunity to learn from teachers and principals across the diverse educational landscape of SFUSD. I'm sure that this next year will shape who I am as an educator for the second half of my teaching career.



Keith McDaniel is Media Designer with SERP.

Q: The SERP Media team will soon be moving into a design space. How might this space be used in the coming years to serve the SERP mission?

Keith McDaniel: Imagine a world where students, teachers, administrators and researchers spend hours excitedly and passionately creating new ideas for education - this has always been SERP's goal, but making it a reality has been a challenge. The SERP Design Center is going to help change that.

When our partners and staff come together in a classroom or conference room, they're surrounded by a perhaps overly familiar box in which to engage in the creative process, and are provided very few tools. Hierarchies prevail, and bold ideas that do arise can be dispatched by the status quo.

The new Design Center will be in a 1400 square foot

warehouse space in central San Francisco with large, bright windows overlooking the San Francisco hills. There will be no permanent walls, and all of the furniture will be on wheels to be rearranged according to the need. Many of the plans and inspiration for the space will come from the highly-acclaimed [Stanford University d.school](#), and we've worked closely with Rich Crandall of their K12 Lab. We'll be building many of the tools ourselves, including large rolling whiteboards and whiteboard walls that allow teams to quickly create an ideation space and capture ideas or physically prototype a concept. When we move in September 1st, the atmosphere will be that of an active workshop with every tool at arm's reach.

We are eager for the space to foster a new dynamic with our partners, bringing them into an immersive design-centered process with a bias toward action and natural iteration. Not only will the partners themselves find benefit, but the media that SERP produces will become richer, quicker and more pervasive by way of these interactions. SERP is strengthening its commitment to implementing new ideas in education by engaging our teams in a multi-faceted approach to ideation, user testing and iteration. The Design Center will be a workhorse to further SERP's mission for years to come.

Elaine Mo & Joshua Lawrence:

Congratulations on your new positions! Tell us more about this transition in your professional lives. How will you stay connected to SERP?



SERP researcher Elaine Mo begins work at University of the Pacific this fall.

Elaine Mo: The decision to leave SERP as Literacy Director was somewhat heart-wrenching because I am passionate about SERP's mission, and the

work I've done thus far with the organization has greatly shaped my identity as an educator and researcher. However, I'm also excited to start as assistant professor at the University of the Pacific in Curriculum and Instruction

this fall because I'll have the opportunity to teach courses on language, literacy, and English learners, and shape the hearts and minds of our future teaching force.

Although pre-SERP I believed strongly that a focus on the research-practice connection in my courses was critical, I now have a more intimate and raw understanding of the potency of a model and theory of action that centralizes such connections. Actively engaging in this collaborative work has sometimes been uncertain and muddled, but acknowledging and attending to that uncertainty has served as the catalyst for innovative change.

As I move forward to working with student teachers and graduate students at UOP, I will strive to share this understanding with my students and colleagues, as well as continue to develop a "use-inspired" research agenda. As a SERP Fellow, I continue to be involved with the research aspects of the Word Generation work, investigating its effectiveness for particular English learner populations and offering suggestions on how best to utilize the program. I also continue to be involved with developing a new partnership between SERP and the Oakland Unified School District. It's an especially gratifying opportunity to support this district because it is poised to make great innovative change, but also because it provided me with 13 years of public education during my formative years. I look forward to many more years of SERP collaborations.



SERP researcher Joshua Lawrence begins work at University of California, Irvine this fall.

Joshua Lawrence: The past three years at the Harvard Graduate School of Education have been tremendously rewarding. My initial work there focused on examining the

academic word learning of Boston middle school students, specifically whether participating in the Word Generation program resulted in strong and sustained vocabulary development. As a former Boston Public School teacher and literacy coach, it was extremely gratifying to find that

students using this program not only improved in their vocabulary knowledge, but sustained these improvements through summer vacation and up to a year beyond the program's completion (Lawrence, Capotosto, Branum-Martin, White, & Snow, in press; Snow, Lawrence, & White, 2009).

Subsequently, I became involved in the randomized trial of Word Generation in three large urban districts, during which SERP has been a crucial support in my thinking about how to take a program to scale as well as how to balance the competing demands of district leaders and methodological rigor. Although I have accepted a position at the University of California, Irvine, I look forward to staying involved in the randomized trial over the next few years. By fulfilling both roles, I hope to expand my understanding of research methodologies (in collaboration with David Francis and Catherine Snow) and to share the SERP vision of practice-embedded research with students at Irvine.

Currently, I am working on adapting student and teacher surveys developed by SERP and Elizabeth Moje for secondary schools that want to better understand the literacy practices of their content-area teachers. This work, supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, has helped me better understand the differences in the kinds of knowledge that researchers and practitioners value. I am excited for the imminent launch of this survey and its companion website, and I expect to use this instrument frequently as my own collaborative research agenda expands in southern California.



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