

Ph.D. in Literacy Studies, Middle Tennessee State University

# Newsletter

## Faculty Profile: Aleka Akoyunoglou Blackwell, Ph.D.

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Dr. Aleka Akoyunoglou Blackwell is a native of Greece, raised in Athens. In the United States since she graduated from high school, she earned a B.S. from Northwestern University, the M.A. in Slavic Linguistics from the University of Illinois

in Champaign/Urbana, and the Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics from Boston University.

Dr. Blackwell joined the MTSU English department in 2001 and is a founding member of the MTSU Ph.D. Program in Literacy Studies. She teaches courses in linguistics and is an active member of the undergraduate Minor in Linguistic Studies. She is also the founder of the MTSU Linguistics Olympiad, an annual competition for high school students

now in its seventh year. Her research explores lexical development, vocabulary skill, and vocabulary assessment. Her findings on early lexical acquisition in monolingual English-speaking preschool children, with a focus on the acquisition of the adjective class, have appeared in the *Journal of Child Language*. Currently, she is developing vocabulary assessment measures for adolescents and young adults, and is exploring the relationships between vocabulary size, working memory, and processing speed.

## Student Profile: Michelle Hasty



A native Nashvillian and graduate of Metro Nashville Public Schools, I earned a B.A. in English from Auburn University and then a Master's degree in Secondary English Education from Peabody at Vanderbilt University.

My first teaching job was at a

private school in Nashville that functioned in part as a refuge for students who had been expelled from or failed out of public schools. I taught tenth grade standard and honors English, eleventh grade standard and honors, and twelfth grade standard and AP courses. Most of the students fell below grade level academically, and most families struggled to pay tuition; the school had nearly closed due to lack of funds. I had these students for two years and saw many grow from resistant readers to curious, motivated learners who could respond critically to texts, verbally and in writing. I knew these students were teaching me something important about

the connection between reading and writing, and interest and motivation, and I wanted to learn more about that connection.

When I began work on my Master's degree, I took a job in a middle school with a demographic very different from the one in my first position. The students were from wealthy, educated families, but these students also found reading difficult. Many resisted reading, even the strongest students. At Vanderbilt, I was learning about metacognition and reading and writing strategies, so I started to try the strategies out on my own students. I surveyed and interviewed the

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GOT NEWS?

We would like to publish your news in our newsletters. Please let us know if you have published, presented or performed other newsworthy events!

Also, if you have questions you'd like answered, please email us the questions and we'll try to provide the answers in the next newsletter.

Email: [skh3g@mtmail.mtsu.edu](mailto:skh3g@mtmail.mtsu.edu)

Annual MTSU Linguistics Olympiad

Saturday, January 26, 2013

Email Dr. Blackwell if you'd like to help out by pretesting problems or serving as a judge.

**Spring Semester Dates**

**January 17, 2013**

Classes begin

**January 21, 2013**

MLK Day—No Classes

**January 31, 2013**

Last day to file Intent to Graduate Form for May 2013 Graduation

**March 11-17, 2013**

Spring Break—No Classes

**March 29, 2013**

Last day to file dissertation for May graduation

**April 1-12, 2013**

Early registration begins

**May 1, 2013**

Last day of classes

## Student Profile (continued)

students, tracked their progress, and I changed my teaching to better serve their needs.

After finishing my graduate work, my son Jackson was born, and we moved for my husband's Emergency Medicine residency to Indiana, where I taught etymology and British literature. After my second son, Bennett, was born, I stopped teaching in the classroom. I tutored, ran an ACT/SAT prep business, worked on political campaigns, taught in the YWCA's GED program, had two more children, Mason and Baker, but I never stopped missing teaching English and working with

students.

A position in 2010 as a mentor for Vanderbilt's secondary English education student teachers led me to follow through with the hope I had always held of entering a doctoral program. I saw the future teachers struggling with the same issues I had as a classroom teacher: secondary students often do not read well. The student teachers' constant refrain was that the theory they had learned in their courses did not translate into practice once they entered the classroom. From this experience, I realized I wanted to teach teachers how to help students to become stronger readers and writers.

This is my second year in our Literacy Studies program. Last year I had the opportunity to work with Dr. Elleman and several colleagues to design and implement an inference study. I currently teach a Reading In the Secondary School course to future teachers at MTSU. I am looking forward to working next semester with Dr. Fain on a research project with English language learners and wordless books. My primary interest is in writing, specifically how critical written response to text affects reading comprehension in secondary students.

## Spring/Summer Conferences and Workshops

### Upcoming Conferences

The 58th Annual IRA Conference, April 19-22, 2013. San Antonio, TX.

Annual COABE Conference, March 24-27, 2013. New Orleans, LA.

The 20th Annual SSSR Conference, July 10-13, 2013. Hong Kong.

The Annual AERA Meeting, April 27-May 1, 2012. San Francisco, CA.

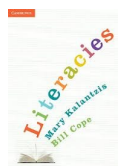
### Upcoming Workshops

2013 DMAC Institute. A two-week institute on the effective use of digital media in college composition classrooms. May 13-24. The Ohio State University.

*Literacies for All Summer* Institute (NCTE), July 18-20, Hempstead, NY. **Deadline for submitting proposals is January 31, 2013.**

## Literacy in a Digital World

*Pioneering Literacy In the Digital Wild West: Empowering Parents and Educators.* How to make technology a helpful ally in literacy development. [http://www.joanganzcooneycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/GLR\\_TechnologyGuide\\_final.pdf](http://www.joanganzcooneycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/GLR_TechnologyGuide_final.pdf)



Kalantzis, M. & Cope, B. (2012). *Literacies*, Cambridge University Press.

With the rise of new technologies and media, the way we communicate is rapidly changing. *Literacies* provides a comprehensive introduction to literacy pedagogy within today's new media environment. It focuses not only on reading and writing, but also on other modes of communication, including oral, visual, audio, gestural and spatial. This focus is designed to supplement, not replace, the enduringly important role of alphabetical literacy. Using real-world examples and illustrations, *Literacies* features the experiences of both teachers and students. It maps a range of methods that teachers can use to help their students develop their capacities to read, write and communicate.

## Publications, Presentations & Posters

### Publications

Compton, D. L., Elleman, A. M., & Catts, H. W. (2012). Searching for supplementary screening measures to identify children at high risk for developing later reading problems. In J. Sabatini, T. O'Reilly, E. R. Albro (Eds.), *Reading and understanding: Innovations in how we view reading assessment*. Rowman and Littlefield Education: Lanham, MD.

### Presentations

Kim, K., Cho, J. H., Kim, T., & Kim, J. K. (November, 2012). Development and Validation of the Korean Motor Performance Scale (KMPS) for Children with Intellectual Disabilities. Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association, Lexington, KY.

Wrobel, N., Kim, J. K., & Fuller, D. (November, 2012). A Polytomous Item Response Theory (IRT) Analysis for Three Mathematics Anxiety Rating Scales. Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association, Lexington, KY.

Elleman, A. M. (2012, June). *Can children learn to read between the lines?* Keynote presentation at the 2012 LETRS Summit, Kansas City, MO.

Elleman, A. M. (2012, November). *Going beyond the who and what: A meta-analysis of inference generation instruction and Becoming a reading detective*. Keynote presentation at the 2012 National Institutes of Learning Development conference in Newport News, VA.



On Saturday, November 10, 2012, our own Dr. Jwa Kim ran the Hard Rock Café Nashville Half Marathon (13.1 miles). His time was 2 hours, 4 minutes, 7 seconds. Way to go, Dr. Kim!

## Destination: Dissertation!

When thinking of the dissertation phase of the program, many doctoral students are filled with apprehension, excitement, and perhaps even a little dread. To soothe fears and anxieties, we offer answers by students who are currently in the dissertation phase of the program to questions most students have about the process.



**Davonna Thomas** is in the *beginning stages* of her dissertation. Here's what she had to say in response to our questions:

### **What are the forms, paperwork, procedures you went through to begin the dissertation process?**

After I finished the preliminary exams, I completed a

dissertation committee formation document. I also think Angela filed some "advance to candidacy" form. I asked Dr. Fain to chair my committee, and then I asked three more professors in our program to join the committee. When the next semester comes up, you have to decide how many credit hours of dissertation credit you want to take. If you have an assistantship (full or half), you must register for 6 hours. Otherwise, you need only register for 1 credit per semester, and you must have a minimum of 12 credit hours of dissertation credit when it's all said and done.

### **How did you decide on your topic?**

The short version is that I've

always known that I was interested in post-secondary developmental reading and composition. The coursework in our program helped me focus my interests and identify areas that need more research. For me, the sociocultural and research methods courses were most instrumental in helping me "hone in" on my chosen topic. Even the process of studying for the preliminary examination helped me think critically about my dissertation topic.

### **How did you approach/decide upon your dissertation committee?**

I chose Dr. Fain to chair my dissertation because of her work in sociocultural approaches to literacy and, specifically, her work on literature circles. I chose Dr. Elleman because of her knowledge

of comprehension and research design. I chose Dr. Kim for his knowledge of statistics. I chose Dr. Blackwell because of her connection to the English/composition world and her linguistics knowledge.

### **What work did you have to do on your topic before you could begin the paperwork, forms, procedures, etc.?**

I ran a pilot study over a year ago, and I have written two closely related research papers: one in sociocultural and one in research design. I have been collecting relevant articles and books for over a year, and I have been tinkering with an outline and works cited for several months. Now I'm drafting my proposal, IRB, informed consent document, etc.

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**Program News**

At the November LITS Program faculty meeting, the program faculty approved a change to the preliminary exam options. Starting in Spring 2013, students in the program will be able to choose one of two options:

- 1) They can take the written preliminary examination (as in the past), or
- 2) They can complete a research project leading to a publishable research article.

The deadline for registration for the preliminary exams, in either format, is the first two weeks of the semester. The traditional written exam will take place as usual in late April, July or November. The research project format will require the student to select a research advisor with whom he or she will work for a semester or until the project is completed. The minimum requirement for this option is a *submitted manuscript to a peer-reviewed journal*.

## Destination: Dissertation! (cont.)



**Rachel Anderberg** is in the *middle stages* of her dissertation. Here's what she had to say in response to our questions:

**How did you decide on your topic?**

Deciding on my topic took longer than I would have liked. I had several ideas that didn't really pan out and so I had to change a few times. My project was developed through many conversations with Dr. Stuart Bernstein about the research we were discussing in our research group and what that meant for practical application in classrooms. I process things like that best by talking through

them, so the weekly conversations is really what helped me develop my questions and study design. I was fortunate that I had the opportunity to work with Dr. Bernstein across multiple years and really develop my questions with him. I would recommend finding someone on the faculty who is knowledgeable in your subject and start to develop this type of relationship with them. It can be difficult to narrow what you want to do to a manageable size. I also recommend deciding on your topic as early as possible so you can have a good understanding of the foundational research on your topic as early as possible. That will help you narrow your specific area much better.

**How did you decide on your dissertation committee, and what role do they play in your dissertation?**

In my case, my committee was pretty obvious. Dr. Bernstein and I had been working on the project for quite some time so he was obviously going to be on the committee. I had an independent study with Dr.

Elleman the semester before I proposed, and we spent a lot of time talking about it. She also has the most experience carrying out the type of intervention research I was looking at, specifically with the data I was interested in examining. Finally, I needed a statistician to help with my data analysis so I asked Dr. Kim.

I looked at the various aspects of my project and what areas I would need support in and then I matched up the faculty members I felt had the most experience in those areas. My recommendation is to map out your questions and then decide which faculty members have the best knowledge base to help you design a study that would answer those questions.

**What does your week/workload look like?**

I have found that the workload right now is actually better than it was before I proposed. The semester before my proposal defense, I was taking classes, studying for my preliminary exam, and working on my proposal. At this point I am implementing my in-

tervention and working on data collection. I spend three days in Tullahoma overseeing the intervention and collecting data and a couple hours a week entering data into spreadsheets. Most of the remaining time I spend managing people. When I'm not in Tullahoma, I'm working to update my literature review. It has been eight months since I did my original search so I need to make sure there isn't new research that has been published since then.

**What is the balance between data collection, research, and writing?**

There's not a lot of writing that can be done at this point. Like I said above, I'm working to update my literature review, but until the data collection is completed, the results and discussion can't be written. The writing sort of goes in stages; you have to write a lot before proposing, and then you have to write a lot after data collection is finished. In between, it is mostly oversight of the project and collecting and managing and analyzing data. Once that is finished, I will go back to writing.