LITERACY & IDENTITY

Home and away: The tensions of community, literacy, and identity

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My mother is not all that impressed with me. Sure, I’ve got a PhD, tenure, a handful of publications, and so on, as do my sister and brother. When people find out that all my mother’s children are college professors, they often remark how proud she must be that we’ve all achieved such lofty postgraduate positions. No big deal, my mother tells them. It’s just the family business. If she and my father had been farmers or pharmacists, she adds, my siblings and I would have probably ended up plowing fields or filling prescriptions.

While I wouldn’t mind a little less midwestern humility on my mother’s part, essentially I know she is right. I do come from a family of teachers—not just my parents, but many of my ancestors before me. My mother taught high school for 33 years, and my father worked in higher education for most of his professional life. I grew up by the academic calendar, thinking that part of any kitchen table was a stack of papers waiting to be graded and, most important, talking in the discourse and language of education.

My home life didn’t make me any smarter than the son of the farmer or the pharmacist. But it did make me comfortable in the language and the cultural byways of school at every level. In my family, taking a detached, analytical position and arguing your point with appropriate evidence extended from discussions of politics to what movie we should see. (As the rogue humanist in a family full of social scientists, I fill the role of the black sheep.) I remember how surprised I was to go to dinner at friends’ houses and find that the discussions around the table were not academic debates and that a fierce analysis of any movie didn’t always begin with the final credits. There is a famous family anecdote about all of us standing at the counter in a fudge shop debating, literally, what we should purchase only to have the clerk on the other side exclaim in horror and disbelief, “What are you all, teachers?”

The point is that growing up in a white, middle class family of teachers, in a white, middle class U.S. community immersed me in the discourses of mainstream education, and that helped, in many ways, make it easier for me to succeed in school. Again, my background doesn’t make me smarter, but it means I didn’t have to learn as much about critical, analytical, and rhetorical conventions valued in school literacy. So when, for example, I decided to be pulled back into the “family business” after an early career in journalism, I found the discourses and cultures of the academic world comfortable and recognizable. Just as important, I never found the discourses in my home life at all in conflict with the
discourses of academic life. I never had to leave my community to succeed in school.

For many students, however, there are differences between the discourses they have learned in their families and communities and those that dominate literacy education. Shaped by cultural forces such as class or ethnicity, some of these differences are significant while others may be more subtle. Of course different discourses can be learned, but they do have to be learned. For example, I would have to learn the discourses of pharmacists, doctors, farmers, or shipbuilders, which children in those families already understand. (By the way, I am not necessarily advocating my family as a functional model of childrearing. Believe me, not every statement a child makes should be analyzed, criticized, and debated.)

If literacy is more than just decoding marks on a page, if it is shaped by culture and context, then the cultures and contexts we inhabit in our lives outside the classroom will necessarily influence the way we approach literacy practices in school. The discourse and literacies in school are a way of knowing, of making meaning, and of “performing” identity. The same can be said of the discourses and literacies of our lives in our homes and communities. Sometimes, however, the latter run counter to institutional norms in ways that cause conflicts for the student, teacher, family, and community. The question that teachers often struggle with is how to reconcile such conflicts in ways that are constructive and ethical, respecting students’ community and home identities yet teaching students the literacies that provide cultural capital in school and beyond.

**Adopting an “identity kit”**

My use of the word discourse is influenced by Gee (2001), who defined it as more than simply learning a new vocabulary or syntax. He defined it as “a sort of ‘identity kit’ which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize” (p. 526).

According to Gee, we all have a primary discourse that we learn from our families and communities and then multiple secondary discourses that we acquire throughout our lives. The primary discourse is often central to what we consider the core elements of our identity. But it is not until we acquire a discourse, until we understand not just how the language works but how to use it in the appropriate cultural context, that we fully become members of a community or group. Discourse affects everything from how we position ourselves rhetorically to when we use emotion, what we draw on as examples, and when and what we decide to use as humor. For example, one secondary discourse I feel comfortable with is baseball; I not only know the language, but I also understand how, when, and why to use it. On the other hand, the discourse of fashion eludes me, and almost any conversation about it would quickly mark me as an outsider.

In literacy classrooms we recognize which students have mastered the discourse of academic culture. They are the ones who step back from the texts they are reading and connect them to others. They discuss ideas and themes without referencing their emotions or basing their opinions on likes or dislikes and don’t display emotional involvement with a text or an argument. They frame their statements in a dispassionate, third-person rhetoric and support their ideas with evidence such as direct quotations of recognized scholarly works, which they know will resonate as relevant with their teachers. I was as adept at all of these discursive and rhetorical strategies as a person growing up on a beach would be at swimming. Yet, like children who swim before they can walk, I’m not at all sure I can point to where I learned them.

My mother recently gave me some of my old high school papers she had saved (OK, she is a bit proud of me), and I was rather surprised to see how comfortable I was in the rhetorical conventions of academic discourse. But I truly don’t remember being taught those conventions and positions in school (where much of the literacy instruction consisted of New Criticism approach-
es to literature and grammar worksheets) any more than I remember how I learned how to swing a baseball bat.

Much of my learning of the discourse of the academic world clearly happened in the academic-style conversations I had at home, which was also a print-rich environment of current periodicals, newspapers, and books on history and politics. In other words, I grew up in an environment that gave me an advantage in adapting to and succeeding in its school system. As Dyson (1997) noted, students from middle class and professional families don't necessarily have more intelligence or better parents, but their "lives are more likely to involve other cultural materials highly valued by schools (e.g., those available in theaters, museums, bookstores, and libraries)" (p. 181). My own work (Williams, 2002) with university students and popular culture indicated that students from wealthy and working class families are equally familiar with and adept at criticizing television programs. The difference comes in the discourse of the criticism when talking to a literacy researcher. Students from more affluent families tended to phrase their comments in detached, dispassionate language with little use of the first person. However, while students from working class families made comments that were just as insightful, their responses were embedded in more emotional statements and often made in the first person.

In the classroom teachers often want to see students as individuals first. Very often we know little more about students' lives and backgrounds outside school than the fragments we can guess from their clothes, hairstyles, and occasional comments. Even if we do know something about their personal lives, we want the classroom to be a democratic space where students, treated as individuals, have the chance to succeed on their own merits. We are wary of making too many generalizations about students' abilities or perceptions on the basis of who they seem to be. And yet students from particular cultural backgrounds, whose acquired discourses align with those valued in school, are rewarded for discourses they have largely learned at home (Gee, 2004). Such students don't have to make choices between the identity they live with in their homes and communities and the identity that will be rewarded in the classroom.

All of us find ourselves, from time to time, in situations where the secondary discourses we must adopt are at odds in some way with the discourses and identities we have learned at home and in our community. The difference, of course, is that some discourses and the membership they allow in particular cultural groups, are more consequential than others. Gee (2001) called these "dominant discourses" and defined them as the "discourses, the mastery of which, at a particularly place and time, brings with it the (potential) acquisition of social 'goods' (money, prestige, status, etc.)." (pp. 527–528). It is clear that standardized academic discourses are dominant discourses. Mastering the literacy practices that count in school can lead one to higher levels of education, professional jobs, and a certain kind of cultural capital.

Access to power and cultural capital is why academic discourses that reflect the values of the dominant culture are the foundation for most literacy pedagogy. Such access is also why proof of fluency in academic literacy and discourse is so important in standardized testing. Standardized testing provides evidence of cultural and class status that maintains the value of academic discourse for the dominant culture by either attesting to the worthiness of those already in the system or acting as a gate for those outside it (Gee, 2004). All kinds of complex and challenging literacy practices can happen outside the classroom, but if they don't fit the dominant discourse, they don't matter. At the same time, students who can fit into the appropriate discourse, even if their work is less brilliant, will be rewarded. As Gee noted:

Children cannot feel they belong at school when their valuable home-based practices...are ignored, denigrated, and unused. They cannot feel like they belong when the real game is acquiring academic
The tension between home and school

Yet many students who do not grow up in middle class, white, professional families and communities master the mainstream academic discourse. Others who are quite capable of mastering it sometimes do not. The question is, if you do master the discourse, what conflict does it place you in with the primary discourse of your home or community? Or, to put it more bluntly, which identity do you choose? How do you reconcile one identity with the other? Do you have to choose? Do you have to feel torn? And what if you decide that mastering the academic discourse extracts the price of alienation from home and community that you are unwilling to pay?

Many literacy scholars have detailed the difficult position some students find themselves in when facing competing discourses and the choices they demand. Sometimes the conflicts come from differences of culture. Such students may find that rhetorical conventions of directness, argumentation, what research counts as evidence, and so on are quite different from what they grew up learning in their home culture (Canagarajah, 2002; Delpit, 1995; Fox, 1994). Other students find that differences in social class between home and school also can create differences in how they approach reading and writing (Dyson, 1997; Lillis, 2001; Lāte, 1998).

I remember one student from a working class background who was frustrated and confused by the way many of her fellow students approached class discussions and peer review in one of my colleague’s courses. The other students would argue about ideas in readings in ways that she found disturbingly aggressive. She was convinced that after class there would be many hurt feelings but was consistently surprised that she seemed to be the only one taking things personally. When I asked her if people argued in her home and community, she said that they did but always with a sense of personal investment. What this student was having difficulty with was the masculine, middle class concept and language of the detached argument in which an attack on an individual’s ideas is not connected to an emotional judgment about that person. She had not yet figured out which phrases and rhetorical approaches signaled such academically acceptable forms of argument and was quite frankly not sure that she wanted to.

My father, on the other hand, growing up the son of a coal miner in a small town during the U.S. Depression, made a clear choice after leaving home to embrace the discourse of middle class academic life. He adapted to it thoroughly, in his work and at home, to the degree that his relationships with his parents and sister became strained and almost irreparable. The crucial dispute between them was often about how he had changed since going to college.

Bourdieu (1984) talked about this conflict through his concept of “habitus,” which is the “internalized form of class condition and of the conditionings it entails” (p. 101). In other words, it is the way we all internalize and normalize the beliefs and values of the community and social class to which we tell ourselves we belong. To Bourdieu, cultural and social capital cannot be separated from economic capital and material conditions. Habitus frames how we make meaning of the social practices around us and provides a sense of comfort in how we react to those practices. It shapes our interpretation of experiences as well as our conception of what actions are possible or desirable. Although there may be many choices available to us, our habitus may limit our way of seeing the world and consequently our sense of which choices to make. Even more subtle, habitus may limit the choices we think we want to act on as a matter of personal tastes or desires—tastes or desires that are internalized social constructs.
If we move from one social habitus to another, we have to learn new social practices, including discourses, and the new values often conflict with the old. The sense of ease people had in negotiating their original habitus is shaken and tested. More distressing can be the alienation from people in the previous community that such moves cause. Of course, not all students feel this kind of alienation, and many get important and overt support from their homes and communities. Still, this kind of tension is present in many students whether we see it or not and has also been reflected in the work of writers such as Richard Rodriguez, Langston Hughes, and Maxine Hong Kingston.

My father, like many other teachers, saw such alienation as inevitable and the choice of academic discourse as the only reasonable one to make. Why would any student, according to such thinking, reject the discourses and literacies of cultural power and social mobility? Certainly, I believe in the kinds of approaches to reading and writing I teach in my classes, and I want to help students learn to negotiate unfamiliar literacy situations so that they can read and write what they want and need to in the future. And yet I wonder how I would have responded as a student if success in acquiring academic discourses and literacies challenged my primary discourse and identity. Again, this is not just a matter of learning other words and syntax; it is often a matter of thinking about the world in a substantially different way and performing an identity substantially different from the one you have had in your community for years. How many of us, if we are comfortable with who we are, want to adopt a significantly new identity if we know it will estrange us from the people we care for and love? I've wondered how many times it's been the result of a choice (whether explicit or not) when students from marginalized cultures or social classes have failed to acquire the discourses and literacies we value in school. I have also wondered if the students have chosen community and home over detached analysis and academic argument. And if I knew they had made this choice, I've wondered if I could blame them.

Balancing discourses

Literacy educators face a quandary. Although we want to respect students' home cultures and discourses, we know that the discourses and literacy practices valued in schools can provide access to power, money, and security. If, as a teacher and a professional, I know how to use such discourses to my advantage in terms of jobs, health care, my children's education, and a myriad of other cultural negotiations, who am I to withhold such knowledge from my students? And it is just such access to power and financial security that many marginalized students want from education and literacy.

One approach is to make such questions and quandaries an explicit part of what we teach when we teach reading and writing. When we talk about reading, writing, grammar, or research or any other element of literacy we are trying to teach, we can also talk with students about why the conventions exist as they do. We can question why academic discourse is constructed and reproduced as it is and ask who has traditionally benefited from this approach. What benefits does it offer now in terms of understanding and communicating in the world? What kinds of information do we learn when we read texts using such discourse? What kinds of information are left out? What are the best situations for using this kind of discourse in conversation and writing? And what kinds of knowledge and communication are more difficult in academic discourse?

We can encourage students to write about the conflicts they feel and to reflect on the connections between rhetorical choices and cultural values. We can help them understand the difference between “standard” reading and writing and “standard-ized” literacies that reflect certain relations of power and economics. If we help students investigate and reflect on such concepts about literacy, we give them the knowledge to
make choices about how they read and write and to understand that the choices are theirs to make.

Although we want to see students as individuals, each with the potential to succeed in our classes, we also need to remember that their homes and communities influence their work as much as, if not more than, our teaching. Therefore we need to listen to what they have to say about their communities and to remember that we offer but one way that they are being taught to understand the world.

REFERENCES