

The GED as Transgender Literacy: Performing in the Learning/Acquisition Borderland

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This article uses James Paul Gee's distinction between acquisition and learning to consider the context of GED tutoring in a correctional facility. It draws on the notion of performance, as defined in Judith Butler's work and in queer theory, to consider the ways that literacy and identity are performed in the space of the prison. Arguing that Butler's broader definition of performance, while helpful, reads identity out of literacy, the article proposes a notion of transgender literacy that shows how the confluence of "distance" and "similarity" can offer a useful way of rereading literacy in institutional spaces.

What [...] might be gained by [...] a postcolonial "order of things" in which relationships between same and other were characterized not as boundaries transgressed but as boundaries blurred, not as borders crossed but as borderlands inhabited, not as spheres adjoined but as archipelagoes intertwined?

—Tom Boellstorff, "The Perfect Path"

Introduction: Into the Borderland

To get from the guard station on the first floor of the Onondaga County Justice Center in Syracuse, New York, to the cell block known as Pod 3A, I passed through five steel doors. The first two moved electronically from right to left, controlled by a deputy behind tinted glass who could see all, without being seen. To reach the third door, I went up two floors, making sure I pushed the elevator button on the west side of the hallway—since the one on the east side had been disabled to inhibit inmate escape. When I reached the third floor, the central corridor was deserted. I was temporarily trapped behind concrete walls as the metal buzzer sent a signal to the guard viewing the corridor through a camera. After I pushed another buzzer, a fourth door opened, leading me to the final physical border: a door with a bulletproof window through which the deputy spotted me and triggered a switch to let me enter.

Austin and I met in a small conference room at the front of Pod 3A, in direct view of the inmate cells, the mess area, and the workers and visitors who constantly moved in and out of the pod. Like "captive shadows" on the periphery of the panopticon

(Foucault 200), we sat across from each other at a narrow table, the distance between us not more than a few feet—sometimes less when we leaned in toward each other. I was there to help Austin with the essay portion of the General Educational Development exam—the GED—a test of high-school abilities designed to certify a standard level of achievement and to open opportunities for jobs and, potentially, for higher education. In the beginning, I remember looking at the lines on the writing test. Straight and black, like the steel bars surrounding us, they had an imposing quality. There were 75 lines in all, circumscribing the answers to be written within their borders during the 45-minute essay portion of the GED.

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From the beginning, I wondered how Austin and I would be able to work together, given the diversity of our backgrounds and experiences. Like many tutoring relationships, ours seemed based on binaries almost as rigid as the steel of the prison. Austin was an African-American man in his mid

twenties, a high-school dropout from a broken home, a recovering drug user from a working-class background. I was a white man in my early forties, trained in graduate and law school, with an upbringing most would describe as middle class. Austin was a seasoned defendant and would-be “jailhouse lawyer,” I was a former prosecutor and law clerk for a district court judge in Colorado. Yet a number of factors seemed to level our relationship, closing the more obvious distances that separated us. In key ways, both of us were outsiders. Austin had been kept at the gates of the educational and legal institutions readily available to me. And I was a foreigner at the Justice Center, an uninitiated guest in an environment where Austin knew the inner workings. Each of us, we soon discovered, was interpellated by the GED, hailed by a test that prescribed the values, formulas, and strategies we would have to assimilate during almost 30 hours we would work together. Thus, at the beginning, at least, I considered both of us “border crossers” (Giroux x), standing between our othernesses, trying to build what Powell and Takayoshi refer to as a “reciprocal relationship” (395-96; see also Pompa 177-78).

It soon became clear that Austin and I were connected by more than a desire for “moments of reciprocity” (Powell and Takayoshi 395). Instead, we both faced the inevitable borderland between what James Paul Gee deems *learning*, a conscious process

accomplished through teaching, and *acquisition*, a subconscious process generally achieved in natural settings through exposure to models and through trial and error (5). This distinction between learning and acquisition is one of the “great divides” in the economy of literacy (Brandt 33). Gee suggests that that every person acquires, or assimilates, his or her primary discourse: “All human beings get one form of [primary] discourse free, so to speak, and this through acquisition” (7). It is clear, however, that for Austin the GED represented what Gee calls a “secondary discourse,” one of any number of non-primary discourses developed in “secondary institutions” such as schools, workplaces, and even prisons. The problem with secondary discourses, says Gee, is that they involve a critical clash between learning and acquisition. According to Gee, children from mainstream homes easily acquire secondary discourses at home and then, in school and other environments, learn strategies for critiquing those secondary discourses. On the other hand, “children from non-mainstream homes often do not get the opportunities to acquire dominant secondary discourses—including those connected with the school—in their homes, due to their parents’ lack of access to these discourses” (9). Thus, the real gap in Austin’s literacy arguably involved his lack of familiarity with secondary discourses—in this case, the secondary discourse required to succeed on the GED.

The “Performance” of Literacy

But even if we infer from Gee that Austin’s inability to access GED literacy involved a problem with acquisition, it is necessary to probe deeper into the learning-acquisition borderland to understand what that means. Gee suggests a crucial distinction when he states that acquisition promotes *performance*—the innate use of language in concrete situations—while learning, by contrast, promotes meta-level knowledge: “[A]cquirers usually beat learners at performance, while learners usually beat acquirers at talking about it, that is, at explication, explanation, analysis, and criticism” (6). What are the implications of Gee’s dictum for tutoring Austin? Given that Austin had never been in a position to acquire the secondary discourse necessary for GED literacy, should my job be to “teach” that literacy, helping him to increase his ability not only to explicate and analyze (i.e., “learn”) GED problems, but to understand the structure and strategies of the exam? While this approach to Austin’s learning seems tempting in some respects, the idea that Austin could easily “learn” the metadiscourse of GED literacy seems just as problematic as the belief that he could simply acquire it.

In fact, during the course of our tutoring relationship, the dichotomy between learning and acquisition became a constant struggle as Austin alternatively embraced and

resisted the GED materials. He seemed to “learn” the rules I tried to teach him: avoid sentence fragments; make subjects and verbs agree; craft a strong thesis sentence, relate topic sentences to that thesis. My real goal, however, was to get him to enact the GED writing rules, to assimilate them so well that he would be able to use them unconsciously when he needed them on the exam. Yet he opposed this assimilative mode, and I often wondered why.

I have only a tentative answer, one that takes me back to three agonizing years in law school, a time when I, too, resisted the acquisition of a particular discourse, indeed, resisted the entire process often termed “thinking like a lawyer.” I resisted what the law was making me become—a person who thought logically, always in terms of winning and losing, able to argue every possible side of a situation, regardless, it seemed, of the ethical consequences. I sat for hours at a study carrel in the law library, dutifully briefing my cases and making my class outlines. Yet I kept my legal learning on the page, refusing to assimilate the larger discourse of the law—rejecting what can be understood as a social literacy that would implicate all aspects of my life.

In light of this apparently irreconcilable conflict between learning and acquisition, I suggest alternatively that the nature of Austin’s GED instruction represented neither one exclusively, but a mixture of both—a hybrid area of negotiation that resembled the borderland of legal literacy I had *learned* but never fully *acquired* as a law student. Put differently, I argue that there is a liminal area between Gee’s concepts of learning and acquiring secondary discourses that requires a more flexible understanding of performance than Gee’s version allows. Admittedly, Gee does acknowledge that “[m]uch of what we come by in life,” after our first enculturation, involves a mixture of learning and acquisition (6), yet his definition of performance as the assimilation of secondary discourses (that often exclude minorities) is not fully adequate. Instead, I turn to a more diverse concept of performance—one that complicates our traditional notions of literacy—introduced by theorist Judith Butler.

In her book *Gender Trouble* Butler writes, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender. . . Identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (33). Now commonly accepted as a central tenet of queer theory, Butler’s idea, as scholar David Gauntlett explains, is that “gender is a performance; it’s what you *do* at particular times, rather than a universal *who you are*” (Par. 7). What’s more, performance is essentially rhetorical, changing according to the circumstances. “Butler argues that we all put on a gender performance, whether

traditional or not, anyway, and so it is not a question of whether to do a gender performance, but what form that performance will take” (Gauntlett Pars. 9-10).

Even though Butler’s theory focuses specifically on gender, viewing “performance” as a fluid concept that depends on context can also help explain Austin’s work on the GED and can thereby possibly serve to reframe our ideas about literacy itself. David Gauntlett confirms this broader applicability when he suggests that Butler’s idea of performance is “not (necessarily) just a view on sexuality, or gender. It also suggests that the confines of any identity can potentially be reinvented by its owner” (Par. 13). Whether Austin’s “performance” in preparing to take the GED should be considered learning or acquisition depends, it seems, on his actions, his responses to certain prompts, and his willingness to assimilate the secondary discourse of the GED.

Arguably, Butler’s notion of performance linked to a free-floating identity makes our usual idea of literacy more diverse; it applies to any of us who decide, through our actions, either to “learn” certain literacies for the moment (the type of performance, I suggest, that I learned because of resistance to my legal training) or to acquire them as part of a more lasting process. To what extent, then, was Austin’s potential success on the GED a question of the form of performance he would choose? Alternatively, is it possible that any performance that might exceed the minimal requirements needed to pass the GED would require a change that goes to the very heart of identity itself?

To what extent, then, was Austin’s potential success on the GED a question of the form of performance he chose? Is it possible that any performance that might exceed the minimal requirements needed to pass the GED would require a change that goes to the very heart of identity itself?

If that’s the case, is Butler’s idea of performance adequate to help us understand the cultural phenomenon of literacy in a new way? I assert that what was at stake in preparing Austin to take the GED was more than simply determining what identity he should “perform” in order to pass the test; it was a deeper question of who he was.

The Idea of a Transgendered Literacy

Early in our tutoring relationship, when Austin asked me if I was married, I answered peremptorily, telling him I lived alone; while he never asked directly about my sexuality, I assumed he knew I was gay. Then, one day, as we started to review some essay prompts, Austin showed me pictures of a transsexual woman who had recently come to visit him in jail. “She looks so much better than she even does in the photo,”

he confided earnestly. I sensed that Austin was trying to reach out and share an aspect of his life with me in an alternative space where borders blurred and our relationship went beyond the boundaries I had tried to prescribe. This gesture signaled, I believe, his attempt to find an intersection between our gender identifications—his, as the lover of a transgendered woman; mine, as a gay man trying to perform my work in a prison environment.

Some of those questions, however, are taken up by Judith Halberstam in her recent book *In a Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, where she explores, among other questions, the reasons behind the slaying of transgender teen Brandon Teena. Citing the work of Tom Boellstorff in her effort to understand the nature of transgendered lives, Halberstam adopts a theory of “translocal” sexualities which, she states, consist of the “potential for ‘someone thousands of miles away to be closer than someone next door’” (38). The “translocal” is a confluence of distance and similarity, “a way of moving beyond local/global and sameness/difference binaries” (38).

How does Halberstam’s use of translocality to understand and complicate transgender theory add to our analysis of literacy theory? If Butler’s notion of “performing” literacy blurs the boundary between learning and acquisition, and transgender theory reintroduces the importance of a self-defined identity, how precisely does the idea of translocality take us further in understanding how the two apparent binaries are, to use Boellstorff’s term, “intertwined” (481)? In his theory, Boellstorff explains:

The production of translocality [. . .] is not predicated on the movement of people; most lesbi and gay Indonesians are working-class, do not speak English, have never traveled abroad, and have no contact with non-Indonesian lesbians and gay men. A majority live in the towns and even the households where they grew up. Nevertheless, most see not only their selves but their social places as figurations of a simultaneously national and global community. (481)

In explicating Boellstorff’s notion of a cross-cultural sexual economy, Halberstam asks, “Could there be some level of correspondence between a nonmetropolitan sexual system in rural Indonesia and one in rural Nebraska?” (38). Her question raises the important parallel question of whether the differences between learning and acquiring secondary discourses may also depend on a kind of translocal identity that goes beyond the notion of performance. Consider, for instance, Austin’s self-identification

as a jailhouse lawyer and mine as a sometime lawyer, both of us resistant to certain discourses that we perceived as intruding on a more fundamental identity. Could our shared resistance to acquiring these literacies represent “translocality,” that is, could this resistance be more central to our ultimate performances of literacy than the differences suggested by our race, class, or educational level? Consider, for example, my record of how Austin analyzed the unfair legal system in his role as “jailhouse lawyer”:

Austin made the point emphatically that minorities are unfairly targeted by the criminal justice system. He explained the whole system of drug distribution: the whites who are ostensibly the ones who traffic in drugs at the high level—usually without retribution—and the minorities who get in trouble for selling them. He said it’s easier for the police to target people in the ghetto . . . At the same time, he asked, who can blame the drug sellers? They make so much money that it seems ridiculous to get the only other kind of job they’re qualified for—working in a fast food restaurant.

Translocality can help us to think differently about the ways in which learning and acquisition are performed. If acquisition involves assimilation and inculcation into a particular mindset, way of thinking and set of values—indeed, an entire economy of meaning (Brandt)—how might it be deployed as more than the mere mastery of performance? If the concept of the translocal, as Halberstam uses it, allows a rapprochement between individuals with widely disparate literacies (e.g., Austin and me), can it also help us understand the extent to which either acquiring or learning literacy implicates the very performance of identity? With legal discourse, for example, I went part of the distance: I learned enough to perform on the bar exam and as an attorney. Yet I argue that I never truly assimilated legal literacy. I rejected that performance because it involved something far more fundamental about my identity; in terms of the gender analogy, I resisted the ultimate transformation that the transgendered undergoes. I’m convinced Austin did not want to assimilate the GED literacy I tried to instill in him, either. In fact, the harder I tried to persuade him of its importance, the more he responded with his own view of literacy—one that entailed becoming a jailhouse lawyer and working with young people to teach them about the criminal justice system. He was willing to perform that more resistant literacy, just as he seemed eager to perform his identity as the lover of a male-to-female transsexual. Thus, in our translocality, Austin and I performed literacy in similar ways, assimilating when we wanted to, learning when we had to, effectively inhabiting Halberstam’s borderland of transgender identity.

Performing in the Borderland

Butler's idea of performance helps us to reassess the prescribed goals and expectations of the GED essay test, which appears to call for a specific type of learning. It seems clear, for example, that the writing portion values form over substance and favors a temporary performance of literacy. In materials published by the Steck-Vaughn Company, the authors break down every aspect of the five-paragraph essay, with the thesis, preview sentences, and topic sentences outlined clearly. The American Council on Education, which designs the GED, supports this formula in its analysis of a student paper that received a score of 5 out of 6: "This 5 paper demonstrates organization and effective support, chief characteristics of this category. The main idea is clearly stated at the end of paragraph one" (75).

Another aspect of the standard GED is that the writing prompts call upon learners to reflect middle-class values. For instance, one prompt asks essay writers to agree or disagree with the statement that "honesty is the best policy" (ACE 77). Another asks whether test takers agree with the adage "A penny saved is a penny earned," while yet another asks writers to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using credit cards (Steck-Vaughn 41). All of these prompts assume that test takers belong to a particular social class. When I worked with Austin, however, he had difficulty addressing the question about credit cards: he had never owned one. The GED presented a kind of social border for Austin, and crossing it required him to learn not only new content, but to perform cultural knowledge that he had not experienced.

In keeping with the GED's expectations, I worked to help Austin write essay responses that would fit within the test's economy of meaning: "Since the invention of the television, most have found television to have a negative effect on society, and thus, it is true that television is a vast wasteland," Austin wrote one afternoon. We had been following the Steck-Vaughn GED Skill Book outlining the steps of the essay. "Do you agree or disagree with the statement that 'TV is a vast wasteland?'" the prompt had asked, and from that point, in incremental steps, we went through every aspect of the question that Austin needed to know in order to succeed on the test. After listing, brainstorming, and outlining, as suggested by the ACE, Austin felt he was able to begin. But not until he understood the idea of a thesis, the function of the all-important preview sentences, and the use of transitions: *first, next, best of all, furthermore*. Austin wrote:

First the violence on television has desensitized our children to hostile behavior. *In addition*, the sexuality shown on television is causing more

children to become sexually promiscuous. *Worst of all* [he continued with a variation on the transition we had discussed], television commercials give viewers a skewed view of the importance of material possessions, hardly ever expressing the other side of reality.

As I worked with Austin, we negotiated the borderland of textual performance. He wanted to start all of his paragraphs at the left margin; I emphasized the importance of indenting “about five spaces.” I urged him to cross his “Ts” at the top of the letter when starting a new sentence instead of in the middle of the letter. He wanted to talk about “the nudity, you know, showing the skin and the breasts, and stuff.” I suggested he call it “sexuality” and pushed him to say what his objection was. When he decided the problem was the negative influence on children, we decided to call it the potential for “sexual promiscuity.” Together, we negotiated the words—some his, some mine—while I worked hard to honor his ideas, language, and point of view. The approach is reminiscent of Powell and Takayoshi’s idea of moments of reciprocity in the research relationship:

This nonhierarchical, reciprocal relationship, in which both researcher and researched learn from one another and have a voice in the study, is informed by a feminist desire for eliminating power inequalities between researchers and participants and a concern for the difficulties of speaking for “the other.” (395)

I attempted to eliminate these hierarchical structures while trying to get Austin to learn the language, design, and structure of GED requirements. The way in which we “performed” literacy cooperatively, despite our differences, falls within the purview of translocality: a confluence of “distance”—which, beyond a strictly geographic measurement, can be classified as distances of race, social class, education, and age—and “similarity” in the way we approached, performed, and understood the personal limits of literacy.

Reversal in a Transgendered Panopticon

At the Justice Center, Austin and I worked within an institutional setting that reversed the normal order of things and where the examiner became the examined within the gaze of the panopticon. Inherent in the idea of the examination, as well as the panopticon, is what Foucault says is a reversal of visibility. Such a reversal, Foucault argues, historically transferred visibility from the king—the seat of

power—to his subjects. Hence, Foucault suggests, it “is this inversion of visibility in the functioning of the disciplines that was to assure the exercise of power even in its lowest manifestations” (200). I contend, however, that the reversal worked within the jail as more than merely a mechanism for refocusing the gaze on individuals—the inmates—with less power. As a tutor in the pods of the justice center, I, too, operated in an area where I was highly visible to all around me. Austin and I worked in a conference enclosed only by windows and a glass door, highly visible from the central area, where inmates had meals, and from the cells that looked down upon the central corridor. Hence, in a facility designed for the surveillance of inmates, it was I who stood under their watchful gaze, visible also to guards and other visitors. I remember being shocked one day when Austin showed me what he said was a hidden microphone in the room, ostensibly making all of our conversations audible (“visible”) to those in unknown locations.

If the principle upon which the panopticon functions is reversal, how does the notion of transgender literacy function within the context of a penal institution? Just as the boundaries between learning and acquisition are blurred by a more flexible theory of performance, the idea of the panopticon blurs the fixed lines between the visible and invisible within the institution. As Ali, who was in charge of the GED educational program at the jail, said, “I get judged by my passing rate. Ours was pretty good last year, around 67%, and I don’t want to jeopardize that.” Ali relied heavily on practice test scores of inmates to determine who would get a coveted spot to take the test, and because Ali wasn’t certain whether Austin was adequately prepared in math, she couldn’t guarantee that Austin would be one of the fifteen or sixteen inmates chosen for the November administration. What’s more, Ali herself was under the “gaze,” or surveillance, of Captain Tom Galka, the county deputy in charge of the Incarcerated Education Program. As Foucault explains,

Power should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so. (201)

The strict reversal of power that Foucault envisions, however, is disrupted in the justice center, as many within its borders are alternately the subject and object of the institutional gaze. In this sense, then, the reach of the literacies within the justice

center can be considered “translocal.” Literacies function as Boellstorff’s “archipelagoes intertwined,” with distances and similarities not always structured according to traditional hierarchies. Given the unique setting of the institution, in fact, it seems that the principles of power became distorted within the prison and worked as a kind of self-examination, a phenomenon Foucault discusses in the context of the medical examination. According to Foucault, “The examination, surrounded by all its documentary techniques, makes each individual a ‘case’: a case which at one and the same time constitutes an object for a branch of knowledge and a hold for a branch of power” (203). The implications for the administration of the GED at the justice center are similar. In many ways, the surveillance that permeates every aspect of the jail turns back on the examiners. All of us, it seems, were implicated: Ali, the other teachers, Austin, and I as a community literacy tutor. For me, Foucault’s analysis of the examination could be applied on yet another level of reversal. As part of my own self-examination, I studied the tutorial relationship and am now writing about it. Thus, I was not only placed under the surveillance of the system, but I examined the surveillance as part of my research and documentation.

The idea of reversal worked in other ways, as well, to render the nature of Austin’s literacy “transgendered.” When we worked together to analyze GED writing prompts, it seemed that the more I tried to push him to acquire the structures, the vocabulary, and the style that would allow him to pass the GED, the more he deflected the subject of conversation. He would talk about the criminal case against him, about his desire to become a jailhouse lawyer, and about how he had changed and grown up in jail—and was determined never to go back again. One day, particularly discouraged with the status of the criminal court case against him, he said to me, “I don’t care about no GED. What good will that be for me?” Thus, in another facet of the blurred borderland we inhabited, we were in effect negotiating the limits of his performance and exploring the deeper implications of translocality. For Austin, acquiring the language of the GED meant acquiring a certain set of values, ethics, perhaps even morals that he was not accustomed to. Was he willing to accept literacy on these terms?

The Implications of a Transgendered Literacy

As a community literacy tutor, I felt I had given Austin the skills to succeed on the GED exam. Yet in the end, I doubt I did anything that would help him on a lasting basis. Late one evening, after my work as a tutor had ended, Ali called me to tell me that Austin had failed the GED, missing the passing score by one point. If only we could have worked together more, I thought. And then I wondered: Would it ever be

possible for Austin to acquire the kind of literacy I had in mind when I began to tutor him? Is acquiring a new literacy a kind of cross-dressing, a matter of learning to don the clothes and enact the persona, something one can learn to do convincingly for a short period of time, and then discard at will? Or does acquiring a new literacy demand changes that reach to the fundamental core of one's being, a transformation as radical and life altering as a transsexual's decision to change his or her gender identity?

Within the context of transgender theory, the idea of translocality helps us understand why binaries are difficult to sustain and why, for instance, two people with backgrounds as diverse as Austin's and mine could, in fact, be connected in a confluence of distance and similarity based on identity. Transgender theory restores the importance of identity in performing literacy. It is not simply a question of whether learning or acquisition is possible given the background of the individual or, taking it a step further, of how he or she chooses to perform literacy on a given task or at a given moment. Even in a community literacy setting, within the confines of a jail or prison, something more fundamental is at stake. It's true that the GED may be a test that asks learners to "perform" in a specific setting for a specific period of time. Yet overall the question of GED literacy depends, as it does with any literacy, on inherent notions of identity. By calling literacy "transgendered," I acknowledge the fundamental core values, meanings, and identities at the heart of literacy.

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