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African American Community Literacy and Urban Debate

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This article examines an African American urban debate league in order to understand the types of literacy training youth in these leagues undergo. As the author notes, debate leagues are important sites of community literacy that are often overshadowed by the popular views of these leagues as highly competitive, predominantly white, and for the socially affluent. However, Cridland-Hughes shows that facilitators and organizers in urban debate settings often shape these leagues as sites of communal and cultural education and support. Her discussion of City Debate, one such organization enacting community literacy, illustrates the relationships built through these sites of rhetorical training and their connection to the development of black youth as critical thinkers, speakers, and citizens of tomorrow.

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“Most people see [debate] as an extracurricular activity, most people see it as a fun little mind game. But for the inner city youth... it’s more of a lifeline.”

—Jay, 3/20/2009

“I guess I’m not fearful of a world in which you have a whole bunch of young people that are activists. It just means...we have people caring about the world they live in.”

—Jamal, 2/27/2008



Policy debate as a space of dialogue has historically been perceived as an affluent, white, and predominantly male activity. This perspective of participants in competitive policy debate is to some extent the truth-- Fine's survey of 400 national level debaters revealed that 64% were male, 83% were Caucasian, and a majority was from upper middle class families (*Gifted Tongues*). Simultaneously, however, the urban debate community has been writing a counter-story to this history of exclusion. The quotes from Jay and Jamal introduce us to the world of urban debate, a world where community, language and literacy is taught through debate as means of training future activists and global citizens. Over the past 20 years, inner city African American communities have reclaimed a history of debate and activism through the establishment of these debate leagues through an atypical policy debate training regimen. Organizers of Urban Debate Leagues tend to use community literacy practices to nurture reflection, deep knowledge, and activism for involved youth. This article explores the connection between African American community literacy and the philosophy of service that has long driven its practice within the United States. It examines Urban Debate Leagues, such as the City Debate organization, as a rich source of African American community literacy.

Overview of urban debate leagues and City Debate

Urban debate leagues, or UDLs, are debate communities located in urban school systems where there has been a rupture in debate participation. The UDLs developed historically out of the need to create a space where women and people of color were welcomed into the larger community of competitive policy debate. In a 1995 diversity sensitivity training program, Melissa Wade, one of the founders of the UDL movement, argued that the norms of debate participation and judging disenfranchised both women and minority students (Wade et al.). Urban debate leagues, then, developed as a response to the noted lack of minority participation in



competitive policy debate. Currently, participants in UDL communities mirror the demographics of the local urban areas where they are located—in most cases, serving youth traditionally labeled, “inner city” or “at-risk” based on type of school attended, family income, or minority status (Collier, 2004; Morris, 2002).

The larger activity of policy debate offers a scaffold for understanding the connection between service and urban debate activities. Policy debates are rigidly-structured conversations centered on one current policy decision facing the United States. In the past, national debate topics have included alternative energy, mental health, and sub-Saharan Africa (Appendix A). Youth debaters spend one academic year researching and writing about the national topic. Of particular note for this article, the reading and writing all connect with a topic of current national interest and discussion. The debate community itself supports engaged literacy, as the reading and writing done to participate in the activity also increases youth engagement with current events. Urban debate pushes the relationship between reading and current events even farther, asking youth to consider how to incorporate new knowledge into the decisions they make about how to live their lives.

Policy debate as an activity has a history of being framed by competition. However, UDLs in general and City Debate in particular refocus on the importance of community to foster literacy activities in urban communities. In addition, City Debate as a community of scholars and activists pushes youth to answer the question “what are you going to do” with the knowledge gained (Jamal, 2/20/2010). Community literacy as shaped through urban debate offers a conduit for the development of activist thought.



Methodology

Data for this study was collected over three years at City Debate, an afterschool outreach program linked to a large UDL community in a major Southeastern city. Wednesdays from five to seven in the evening, youth arrive at a local university to participate in debate-related activities. Utilizing case study methodology, data included video- and audio taped sessions, in-depth interviews, and documents disseminated and created by the community (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Pink, 2001; Prior, 2003; Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Youth in this community receive training materials and engage in labs with national level college debaters. More importantly, the goals of this particular program were to socialize youth to someday become members of a community of “scholars and activists” (Jamal, 2/28/2008). City Debate as a community increases access to debate pedagogy and resources for inner city youth.

Literacy as “what you do”

Shor defines critical literacy as “habits of thought, reading, writing and speaking which go beneath surface meaning... to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action”(129). Shor’s definition of literacy reflects the belief that the ability to read and write alone means little, being literate is as much about what you do with the knowledge gained as the ability to read and write. Because access to and denial of literacy have historically had serious consequences in the world, particularly for marginalized communities (Ladson- Billings 3), the application of critical literacy as a lens through which to view City Debate offers the unique opportunity to explore a community of African American literacy learners who are taught that literacy should lead to action. In this article, I argue that the African American belief in community literacy as a form



of activism can be seen in the philosophy and activities of the community of City Debate. In challenging the preconceived notions of what debate should be, the community builds networks and lays the foundation for youth activism.

African American Literacy: A History of Activism

Historic overviews of literacy trends in the United States tell a story of systemic denial of literacy to the African American community during enslavement. For much of the history of the United States, African Americans were not allowed to read or write. In his history of literacy in the United States, Graff noted that 36.1% of free black men and 28.4% of free black women were described as illiterate in 1860. For previously enslaved African Americans, the percentage described as illiterate was as high as 80% in 1870. By 1900, that number had dropped to 44%. The percentages document the increasing numbers of African Americans acquiring literacy after emancipation and highlight the value placed on education and literacy as “literacy and schooling represented great promises of progress as well as symbols of liberation”(226).

A common theme of African American literacy acquisition has been the enduring role of nontraditional learning spaces. Out-of- school learning has occupied an important role in the dissemination and acquisition of literacy for African Americans. McHenry and Heath’s study of the literacy practices of African American men and women between 1830 and 1940 reveals that culturally religious spaces, literary societies and women’s clubs, and literary journals served as primary sites of literacy acquisition. For this community of readers, thinkers and writers, “reading literature and taking part in writing groups provided... a central orientation toward being literate, aiding self- improvement, and moving social justice forward with additional ‘voice’”(262). McHenry and Heath argue that the history of African American communication in the United



States reflects a historic belief in the intersection of literacy and power, and a desire for “social justice” (262).

Ladson- Billings references this tradition in her Presidential Address to the American Educational Research Association when she reminds listeners that due to slavery, segregation, and other unjust social practices African Americans were denied access to formal education and literacy training and had to seek literacy through other means (5-6). In her later work, McHenry examines African American literary societies, one of the non-traditional resources for African American literacy and political training that also functioned “as vehicles of empowerment for their African American members” (98). Fisher extends the work of McHenry and Heath, in her 2004 article “The song is unfinished,” by examining two Northern California poetry venues and their connection to the custom of informal literary societies. Tracing a history of African American community, she reflects on how “the legacy of literacy for people of African descent has historically been a precursor to action” (292). In *Black Literate Lives*, Fisher also documented the historical connection between literacy and action through her study of independent black institutions and the Black Power and Black Arts movements. As she reveals in her examination of articles from a contemporary Black newspaper and its influence on the social activism of a local community, independent black institutions and organizations continue to have a significant influence on political decisions and activism in the greater Black community. These resources offer examples of how individuals in the African American community have used literacy to support broad political and educational agendas.

However, these sites extend the acquisition of literacy into the formation of an African American body politic. In her examination of the historical connection between literacy and freedom in the African American community, Perry makes the argument that literacy in the African American community has always been about more than the individual, that “literacy was something to share” (14). Kates explicitly describes



the connection between literacy and social transformation in her analysis of the role of literacy and the Citizenship Schools in expanding voting rights in the South (“Literacy”). The Citizenship Schools not only trained students to read for basic literacy but also provided a curriculum focused on a common African American history. In this way, literacy acted as a tool for furthering voting rights, while at the same time augmenting the history taught in the public schools with a history specific to the African American struggle for civil rights. Although Kates acknowledges that literacy alone does not change the social structure, she argues that “given the situation, literacy had to be imbued with a particular power” by all involved with the Citizenship Schools (494). In this case, the belief in literacy as a means of challenging oppression was a precursor to that challenge becoming a reality. Without community support for literacy training and voting, the Citizenship schools could not affect large-scale political change. The African American community supported the schools and then subsequently used the literacy training to gain the vote and political power in broader society.

The tradition of community literacy and service continues to emerge in the work of the UDLs. The history of literacy for the African American community is a story of individual acquisition for dissemination to the larger community and, in doing so, pushing for racial uplift. Importantly, this belief in the power of literacy centralizes the importance of the community. This tripartite connection between literacy, community, and service is the historical legacy of African American literacy, and forms a foundation for the following discussion.

Community, Literacy, and Activism in City Debate

Jamal, the director of the City Debate program, towers over most of the youth in attendance, but his size is not the first thing I notice. Talking with staff and students, laughing and making jokes, he conveys a sense



of purpose and the belief that right now, at City Debate on a Wednesday night, he is exactly where he is supposed to be. In his capacity as City Debate director, Jamal starts the program off tonight with general announcements. The students are restless and Jamal does not have their full attention. He waits for silence—"I am in no rush. And I love you that much." Youth in the audience in this large lecture room settle and let him continue with the announcements. He finishes by saying, "I am glad, like I said, to see each and every one of you. Hopefully all of you, ALL OF YOU, are keeping up with what's going on in the world, becoming the young critical scholars that we think that all of you are capable of [being]" (Opening Assembly, 2/20/2008).

Every Wednesday evening, youth from across the city arrived at City Debate, a program meeting at a local university in borrowed space. In my three years of observation, the meeting location changed three times, and each new semester seemed to bring with it concurrent concerns about funding and whether buses had been secured from the local school system to ferry youth to and from the program. College student volunteers staffed the various breakout sessions, and availability depended greatly on weekly academic workloads as well as each volunteer's own individual debate schedule. Although the logistics of the community could best be described as a permanent state of flux, Jamal explained that the real beauty of the community was its resiliency. Even though the space changed, Jamal optimistically commented on how "in regards to the location, our students and staff have still been committed to learn about debate regardless of those obstacles and challenge" (2/28/2010). What is also remarkable about City Debate is this optimism that space will be provided, that transportation will be worked out, and that the community will continue to serve youth debaters.

City Debate as a program works to foster a sense of community and interpersonal relationships with the perspective that strong community allowed for even stronger literacy and activist work. Jamal reflected that "what we've tried to do with the... urban debate leagues around



the country is to be intentional about creating community so that that becomes something that becomes a foundation not a byproduct of the winning, not a byproduct of the community” (2/27/2008). Although the community exists to support participation in a competitive environment, Jamal describes the goal of the community as fostering critical thought that will also support youth in challenging unjust structures encountered in life. Similar to many of the themes noted in the histories of African American literacy, City Debate understands literacy as a community. In addition, literacy and knowledge are always connected to an expectation of action. The community of City Debate is greater than the sum of the individual parts.

One of the spaces for community development occurred at the opening of City Debate each week. Wednesday afternoons at five o’clock, Jamal called City Debate to order with a brief opening assembly. In this opening assembly, he reminded youth participants how much the staff appreciated their attendance and made announcements relevant to the whole community. These announcements varied from week to week. In one session, the announcements included the date of the next debate tournament, a request for information forms to be returned, a list of opportunities for which students could volunteer, and information about the end of year banquet (2/20/2008). In another session, Jamal announced scholarship opportunities and college preparation activities (3/18/2009). The opening assembly served as an opportunity to disseminate information considered relevant to the community before participants transitioned into the skill-building breakout sessions where youth were separated based on type of debate and level of participation.

The intentional focus on community results in a mutually engaged group of volunteers and youth participants. Jay, a former UDL participant and current City Debate volunteer reflected on how “a lot of [lab leaders] have walked the walk that [youth participants] walk... and it’s not by coincidence but by design that these things happen” (3/20/2009). Jay saw himself as a role model for City Debate youth, a role reinforced by



his previous experiences in urban debate as a high school participant. Jay credited urban debate with helping him cultivate an activist voice and for offering an avenue towards college. For Jay, participation in City Debate offered a way for him to mentor youth with whom he identified as both a former urban debate participant and as an African American male who grew up in an inner city environment. Jay's remarks reflect an ongoing sense of responsibility to the community of urban debate and the African American community as a whole, reinforcing the African American community literacy emphasis on giving back.

For youth participants, the relationships built at City Debate served as incentive for continued participation. One of the most vocal participants, Robb, started debating in middle school after unsuccessfully circulating a petition to expose a teacher who she believed was doing very little teaching. Describing what she learned from the experience, she reflected, "I didn't know what the next step was [after my petition]... if I would have known about debate I would have been able to put my point across" (2/28/2009). At the time of our interview, she continued to participate in City Debate even though her high school no longer had a debate team. When I asked why, she explained that "Jamal is one thing I'd say kept me in debate... he always had a smile on his face, he always had a quote, he was always ready, and he always embraced everybody" (2/28/2009). For Robb, debate was as much about community- building as about skill-building. She built relationships that continued even after her opportunity to compete ended.

Participants in the community describe a sense of belonging and of contributing to the community. Many adult participants identify with the youth; like Jay, they saw them as being like themselves. Youth participants like Robb emphasize the connection with adults they saw as mentors and supporters. The creation of a mutually respectful community allowed for the discussion of potentially volatile issues through debate but also established a sense of responsibility to a group identity bigger than that of the individual participant.



“What are you going to do?”: Community as a Conduit for Activist Learning

As explored in the previous section, City Debate participants intentionally shaped a community of mutually invested volunteers and youth debaters. The community created in City Debate supported the cultivation of activists and literacy learners among youth participants and volunteers. Methods of supporting critical literacy at City Debate varied depending on the space in which students interacted. At the opening assembly of City Debate, critical literacy was performed by supporting student voice and making students aware of various spaces for action and opportunities available to them. During the first 15 to 20 minutes of each session, students gathered as a whole group and received information about current events, opportunities for action, and college information sessions.

Organizers at City Debate and in the larger League of City Debaters facilitated both internal and external opportunities for students to use their voices. Although debate tournaments formed the majority of scheduled and announced activities, youth debaters also participated in conversations outside of the debate round with adults in positions of power. At one session, students received information about the National Issues Forum, a joint activity with a representative of the American Bar Association that included a discussion of ways of ensuring a fair judiciary. Jamal described it as “an opportunity to make your voice be heard” (02/25/09). While this program is a national program, this forum was organized and convened specifically for members of the local UDL community. City Debate facilitated the program, provided transportation to and from the forum, and provided students with a brief description of the topic as well as additional written information should they wish to research more about not only the fairness of the judiciary but also the prison system in general. In this instance, City Debate provided additional support for students to participate with informed opinions and criticism. After the National Issues Forum, participating students



returned to City Debate, analyzed the ideas and concerns presented in the Forum and talked about how their ideas would then be presented to the National Bar Association. This experience allowed youth to discuss in depth both the judiciary and the larger topics of prison and education with someone in the position to hear and act on their concerns. Real-world challenges and conflicts presented literacy as a form of action shaping the literacy activities in City Debate.

In many cases, allusions to a local and cultural community reinforced for youth the opportunities available to them as part of a literacy community. In one example, Jamal announced a speech by noted civil rights participant Angela Davis to the group, emphasizing that she is “a powerful figure in our history” (02/25/09). Jamal specifically used the words “our history” when describing the importance of Angela Davis. In doing so, he acknowledged that most of the youth in the room shared the African American experience and needed to know the history relevant to that community. These types of occurrences were common at City Debate. Such moments offered the type of supplemental education described by Fisher her article “The Song is Unfinished” and Kates in “Literacy, Voting Rights, and the Citizenship Schools in the South, 1957-1970,” as keys to a uniquely African American literacy development. Moreover, Jamal’s assertion that “a contingency of us will be there and we want you to meet us there” emphasized how relationships between youth, volunteers, and organizers extended outside of the City Debate weekly meeting and beyond formal debate programs. Jamal’s assurance that City Debate was there for them indicated the organization’s investment in the community as a whole and not merely the individuals.

Although the opening assembly was a short component of the overall program, it operated to unify the community. Students and staff shared ideas and perspectives, and all were held to the same standards of participation and respect. In this way, the community supported both the development of individual perspectives and the articulation of those perspectives within the larger community space.



Literacy in this space reflected the ideals of engaging with both the community of City Debate and their cultural heritage. Youth participants learned aspects of African American history, built relationships with older community members and discussed current issues. In doing so, they paid homage to the African American legacy of seeing literacy as a means of service. City Debate and the UDL focus on community continue the legacy of African American literacy and service as they teach youth to seek knowledge and trust their own informed voices.

Discussion

For the youth in City Debate, community literacy is enacted through the practice of literacy as activism. One of the most unique aspects of City Debate is the extension of these African American activist literacy perspectives into the predominantly white policy debate world. On a conceptual level, privileging community over competition is a fundamentally radical position for a debate program. In the debate community, competition frames discourse and interaction. For City Debate, however, community frames discourse and interaction, both within and outside of formal debate participation. This philosophical centralization of community building, particularly in literacy, connects with the past research into literacy as something that is communally owned for African Americans. This is reinforced by Jamal's constant questioning of youth, "what will you do?" This is not a question of debate strategy, but rather a question that asks the youth to think about how their language development and burgeoning social awareness will help the larger community.

This emphasis on community building connected to the history of the African American community as reflected through its struggle for social uplift. It is no surprise, then, that the volunteers at City Debate include many first generation urban debaters who returned to help youth



with whom they identified in some way. As Jay commented, “we try to meet them where they are and bring them from that point because we’ve been there ourselves” (3/20/2009). This is a calling, these are volunteers and participants who see words and a command of language, both oral and written, as ways of breaking out of the structural inequality of schooling and of supporting youth in developing critical voices. The notion of critical literacy should not be reduced to studies of how race, class, gender and power are included in formal school curriculum without considering its inclusion in local community programs that use the affective relationships between the guides and the new participants to educate individuals about culture, language and power. Specific attention to the affective domain in a learning community is what Siddle Walker describes as a distinctive African American teaching tradition (2002).

Although City Debate demonstrates the continuation of an African American perspective on literacy and service, the lessons learned by the predominantly African American participants are lessons that would benefit all youth both inside and outside of schools. The question of what we want youth to be able to do and how school fits into that continues to challenge researchers and school administrators. This ethnographic study details a community in which the emphasis is on gaining knowledge, building relationships, and using learning for community uplift models the type of community pedagogies that can usefully be adapted across cultural boundaries for future community initiatives.

City Debate prepares youth for debate competition, but the community itself functions outside of the concept of head to head competition where youth are praised for their success and punished for their failure. Instead, individual members commit to participating in the community, learning how to learn and seeing that knowledge put into action. City Debate, as an urban debate community, provides space for rigorous practice of reading, writing and oral communication, and simultaneously folding



youth into a support community where the relationships developed are privileged over competitive success.

Accountability and testing are buzzwords for students and teachers navigating educational institutions. However, creating competition and hierarchies isolates students from the potential of building a community working together for a higher goal. The accountability movement is antithetical to what we learn from an African-American centered perspective on literacy and community. If community is at the center of teaching youth to engage with their education and their world, African American perspectives on community literacy and organizations such as City Debate offer an often overlooked model for raising an ethical, just, and engaged citizenry.



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