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A Conversation About Literacy Narratives and Social Power

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The following email conversation, much of it done in a coffee shop in Amherst, Massachusetts across a table from each other, contains two strands that quickly merge into one. We've reproduced the beginning of each strand. We each sent an initial email (before either of us had read the other's posting) and responded to them. Strand one starts with Lauren's first posting and Kirk's response to it, strand two with Kirk's first posting and Lauren's response. Following that, somewhat chaotically, we've included postings, which take up various themes. Readers will see where they merge, and where threads get picked up (or dropped).

Strand One:

Lauren's First Posting to Kirk

Dear Kirk,

I am intrigued by your idea of the absence of literacy as a literacy event. You write that, "not only can a literacy event occur without the presence of a piece of writing, in fact it is the very absence of that writing that makes it a literacy event." So, in other words, literacy can be absent at moments—and in situations—where we expect its occurrence. As I understand it, what makes the absence of writing or reading a literacy event is its conspicuous lack in the context of a



literate mainstream. In your first example of the boy who cut school because of his anxiety over failing the spelling test, his non-literacy is an issue because he is resisting expected school behavior. What's so disturbing in this example is the reality that for some people school literacy is dangerous enough to avoid. You comment too that, "just as people do things with literacy, so does literacy do things to people." School literacy, and the threat of failure, is so threatening to this boy that he hides and is thus pressured into becoming labeled as less than fully literate.

Lauren

Kirk's first response to Lauren:

Hi Lauren –

I would say it's not just the conspicuous lack in the context of a literate mainstream that makes a literacy event occur in the absence of literacy. It's a rather a conspicuous lack that occurs *intentionally* - whether by outlawing it, as in the case of the anti-literacy education laws, or by a choice based on fear or humiliation, like my former student at the literacy center who stopped going to school so he wouldn't get hit.

The example I am working with recently comes from the literacy tests put in place for disenfranchisement of African Americans in the South. In that case, not voting becomes a literacy event for those excluded, either because they didn't pass or refused to try to pass. And that absence, at least in the examples I can think of, highlights power directly, highlights particularly how literacy is amenable for use as a tool of control and manipulation, used to regulate access.

Kirk



Strand Two:

Kirk's first posting to Lauren

Hi Lauren –

Maybe I was so struck by George's comment that "I can't speak the word that I don't know" because it so marvelously gets at the idea I explore in my essay and in my recent work in general. In his hypothetical courtroom situation, he is unable even to approximate a legal discourse because of his limited access to education. My research, which started with undereducated adults in the literacy center where I worked for 8 years in Seattle, looks at how dominant literacy practices regulate that access. In other words, I'm picking up on your concluding suggestion that "we look more deeply at the construction of dominant literacy narratives and how they operate." I'll play with your phrase "dominant literacy narratives" a little, because there are two readings of it. Does "dominant" modify "literacy narratives"—or—does "dominant literacy" modify "narratives"? There are of course examples of how these phrases, however grammatically parsed, mean the same thing. One of the dominant literacy narratives you comment on—literacy as the ticket to economic gain—is both a literacy narrative that has cultural primacy over other narratives and a

narrative that justifies and maintains a dominant literacy. I would say, though, that my focus has become narratives of dominant literacies, in two ways: first, the stories told from a dominant literacy perspective in order to justify dominant literacy, and second, stories about how dominant literacy practices - more particularly dominant literates - support already existing social and cultural hierarchies.

"I can't speak the word I don't know," says all that, I think. It speaks to the "not knowing": a "not knowing" that George recognizes as structurally produced (as indicated in his powerful, even cinematic image of watching his boss's children leave for and return from school



while he works in the field), but also a “not knowing” that becomes a later justification for exclusion. It seems to me like George is talking about a literacy event that centers on the absence of literacy, because it leads to a literal silencing or, in his example, an inability to speak.

I admire the careful way you use George’s telling to explore alternative literacy narratives, their shape and the ways they push against dominant literacy narratives, even as they are determined partly by those dominant narratives. You present George as a literacy theorist, in other words, whose work speaks to and with other literacy theorists. That’s an important alternative literacy narrative too, one that plays with the idea and location of expert knowledge.

Kirk

Lauren’s first response to Kirk

Hi Kirk,

I remember that when George commented in an interview, “I can’t speak the word I don’t know,” I was struck by how he was naming power right there in that seemingly straightforward statement. His comment points directly to the two interpretations you draw out here: the “not knowing” that is “structurally produced” as you explain in your article when you write about antebellum and pre-Civil Rights legislation that excluded African-Americans from literacy and thus kept them enslaved; and the “not knowing” which later becomes exclusion—literally, not knowing the word. That “not knowing” is silencing. Another member of my study talked extensively about being quiet in conversations—particularly political conversations—because of his anxiety that since he didn’t know the words, he might not know the ideas. He would doubt the validity of his own thinking because of how he had internalized the stigma of his non-literacy.



My original research focused on case studies of four people who attended a literacy center in Springfield, Massachusetts that sounds very much like your site in Seattle.

One of the participants, Chief, like George, is also an African-American man who grew up on a sharecropper's farm in South Carolina. However, Chief's relationship to the absence of literacy was quite different from George's. While George was pained at school and by the sense of exclusion he experienced on the occasions when he attended school, Chief craved education. Chief tells a funny story about sneaking one of his sisters onto the school bus (there was bus service that picked up kids at Chief's house) when his father wasn't looking. Even though the boys in the family were not permitted to go to school because they had to work in the fields with their father, the rules were looser for their sisters; and so, the boys would help the girls to gain access to the schooling that they were denied.

Back to the silencing because of not knowing the word: Chief explained in an interview that he used to be shy around people because he did not believe he had the right words to participate in conversations. When we talked about his effort to get his brother to attend the literacy center with him, Chief explained:

C: It's a, uh, a shyness from when you, ah, can't read and write, you just, it's a person, like well myself, and like [my] brother, too, I can see it in him. You set back and let a lot of other people do the talking because you don't say too much.

L: Uh huh. Because you feel like you don't know? Like you don't...

C: It's a lot of—a lot of reasons that you don't, you don't. Uh, you don't want to say the wrong thing. Ah, you get some of the words, big words that are said you don't understand. So, you don't want to say nothing that you don't know what you're talking about.

L: Right. You think it's, like—I don't know, I could be totally off—but, is it also, like, what you might say, like your voice doesn't matter as much as somebody else's, maybe?



C: Ah, that too.

L: Yeah.

C: Opinions.

L: Yeah.

C: They might not, uh, even if they don't know you can't read, you still be thinking: my opinion don't mean nothing here.

When he was non-literate Chief felt “shyness” when he was in public because he was unsure that his opinions were valid (“my opinion don't mean nothing here”). He did not feel this way because he didn't know what he thought but because he did not have the right words.

Although you separate out two kinds of “not knowing,” your comments also lead me back to the way that “not knowing” is tangled: in practice, the strands are not separated out, and that seems to be part of the complicated nature of the absence of literacy. And, as you point out so aptly in your article, we are all accustomed to dominant narratives of non-literacy, which serve to distract us from the deeper problem of racism. You explain in reference to the penal system that, “Denying literacy education... allows arguments in which low literacy and education explain the conditions of slaves and prisoners, silencing other potential causes such as racism... Social causes, causes that implicate the entire population and not just the slaves and prisoners, become silences along with the slaves and prisoners.”

I'm delighted that you think I present George as a “literacy theorist.” In my ongoing interviews and informal conversations with George, I've noticed that he often precedes a story by stating: “Let me explain it to you,” or, “the way I look at it is...” Each time he introduces a narrative with one of these phrases, I know that George is about to step into the role of literacy expert. That's when I hear him voice alternative narratives that take on some of the same issues as Elspeth Stuckey in *The Violence of Literacy* and that challenge Henry Giroux's claim that we must teach people to be critical.



Last, but certainly not least: dominant literacy narratives. You ask, does “dominant” modify “literacy narratives”—or—does “dominant literacy” modify “narratives”? This is a big question. In my dissertation, I actually have a whole chapter on dominant literacy narratives. It was the hardest chapter to write because the concept was so difficult to define. In the process of trying to figure out what dominant literacy narratives are and how they operate, I discovered that none of the theorists I read who are critical of dominant narratives ever specify what they are. This hole led me to name four different narratives, which I mention in the article: functional literacy, economic gain, an ethic of self-improvement, and citizenship. In your piece, “In the Hallways of the Literacy Narrative: Violence and the Power of Literacy,” when you criticize the genre of the literacy narrative, you touch especially on the narrative of the improved individual who is transformed through literacy.

In answer to your question, I would have to say both, as you explain: “a literacy narrative that has cultural primacy over other narratives and a narrative that justifies and maintains a dominant literacy.” A narrative that “justifies and maintains” hegemonic beliefs and systems also has “primacy over other narratives.” It’s like “not knowing”: the strands are tangled. A dominant literacy narrative prevails at the same time that it silences other narratives. This happens when people go through the usual process of reinforcing the dominant.

Lauren

Kirk,

Can you explain a bit about the history of the literacy tests and how they were used in different states as a means of regulation and control?

Lauren



Lauren –

After decades in which teaching slaves or freed blacks were classified as a crime (literacy here being a threat to the social order), Southern states began testing for literacy as a tool of legal disenfranchisement of African Americans. It's a perfect circle, in some ways: deny access to literacy education, and then use a lack of adequate literacy to justify denying access to political and social power. Literacy shifts from being a threat, which must be denied, to being a pre-requisite for citizenship.

I became interested in these tests through my work on the Citizenship Schools that Highlander began in the 1950s on Johns Island, South Carolina. Those schools came about in order to teach adults to read so that they could pass the literacy test in place to keep them from voting (and all the students who stayed in the class registered to vote at its conclusion). I started studying the literacy test as a way to contextualize those schools and when I realized so little had been written explicitly about them.

It's a long complex history, one that begins in the antebellum North—Connecticut in 1855 and Massachusetts in 1857—as a way to exclude immigrants, especially Irish Catholics, from voting. The idea was consciously picked up in the South as one ideal tool to effect disenfranchisement of African Americans without relying on race (another was the poll-tax), and what's so interesting to me about the literacy tests was that while everyone—supporters and critics alike—understood that the tests were being used to disenfranchise African Americans (and a negligible number of poor whites), the ideal trumpeted behind it—the connection of literacy to citizenship, and the goal of a fully educated electorate that would make informed decisions as voters—was powerful enough to sustain the test for decades in the South. It's also interesting, of course, in relation to the anti-literacy education laws I write about here, part of the “not-knowing” we're exploring. The denial of literacy education turns into a justification of



denying full citizenship rights on the basis of a lack of literacy.

The tests, then, exemplify two issues that I think are primary in the history of literacy policy in the United States. First, promoters of official literacy policy almost always rely on accepted notions about the inherent goodness of literacy as part of the justification for the policy - this occurs in workplace education, correctional education, and k-12 literacy policy. It's easy, because everyone knows—could it be more obvious? —how great literacy is, and can imagine a lack of literacy as a state of cultural helplessness and debilitating social deficiency. But these tests also were a technology that allowed for racist action to be carried out in the name of something other than race, and they are a further representation of the ways that literacy and race are almost always intrinsically connected in official literacy policy. The anti-literacy education laws are an example of this, though they don't, obviously, trumpet the inherent cultural goodness of literacy!

Kirk

Kirk,

Your comments suggest that people were aware of the injustice of such exams and legislation—it is the kind of thing people would sit around and discuss among themselves—and yet ordinary citizens (whether or not they had voting rights) felt powerless to make changes.

I am reminded of some of Harvey Graff and John Trimbur's examination of the role of the Protestant church on public school curriculum throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Control of literacy, in terms of who had access to it and for what purposes, was used (has always been used?) to separate citizenry by race, class, and



religion. Jenny Cook-Gumperz has also looked at educational reformers of the nineteenth century arguing against literacy instruction for the masses in order to maintain a class divide and prevent political unrest. What seems to be at the heart of controlling literacy is protecting against the possibility of political unrest. The literacy exams are a means of legalizing and justifying the silencing of certain people so that their stories remain unheard and don't pose a social threat. You show this really well in your discussion of incarcerated people who are denied the right to literacy. And I think your new focus on the literacy tests shows how literacy has been used as a means of social control at many times and in different contexts but often toward the same ends.

Lauren

Lauren -

Most of the seeds of my ideas regarding literacy stem from my work in the learning center in Seattle. (I've written about this in "Hallways" and a 1999 Cs essay.) I remember reading people like Ong, and Goody and Watt, who I came to after I'd worked in the literacy center for several years. (The learning center was where I learned how to teach.) I won't spend time responding to those writers—there's enough done about that—but what I realized was that they provided no framework that helped me understand the experience and intellect of the students I worked with, students who I very early on came to realize as smart and savvy and capable of negotiating social systems and networks that I didn't even know existed. And those students very clearly helped me realize that the Freirean approach to literacy I had learned from the staff at the learning center didn't work when I presumed that I could see the conditions of oppression in student lives better than they could, that I had some insight that could penetrate their false consciousness. In other



words, my students and what they taught me provided the tools to begin speaking back to theories of literacy. In the same way my students at the jail in Kansas helped me think through the theories of criminality and prisons that I was coming across.

It's important, I think, to recognize these adults as theorists, then, whose theories are available primarily in the form of narrative, which come laden with fairly detailed analysis and interpretation. I struggled as a writer with those interviews to the degree that I gave myself power to interpret them myself, and it became very important that I use those interviews as a primary frame in interpreting the data. When I heard again and again from students about childhood experiences of violence and humiliation surrounding education—stories I never solicited directly beyond asking about their early educational experiences and which I had not anticipated in their answers—I realized that these were primary. Likewise, I've also written about, in the Cs essay, the student initiative to change the name of the school from Goodwill Adult Literacy Center to Goodwill Community Education Center. Their argument was that "literacy" in the title made the place embarrassing to go into because it marked them as illiterate. The students' articulation of their concern is a theory that I have used ever since—they underlie the work I did in this essay, of course. In the end, that set of interviews, and more importantly all the students I worked with at the center, gave me the theoretical perspective I needed to do the work I've done ever since.

Kirk

Kirk,

I remember reading about the student initiative to change the name of the Goodwill Center and how significant that was, how it gave the



students a certain agency to participate in removing the stigma of “illiterate.” I wanted to respond to your reference to the place you “go into” with a story about another member of my study, Lee Ann. Lee Ann once told me a story about how she first came to Read/Write/Now. Everyone at the center has a story about the event or series of events that provided their motivation to pursue literacy in adulthood. R/W/N is located in one wing of a branch library in Springfield. Lee Ann’s story is that a neighbor of hers, a woman in the trailer park where she lives about ½ a mile from the center, asked her for a ride to return some library books. Lee Ann had a driver’s license (like many of the people who attend the center) because she had been able to take a driving test that did not require reading. So, she took her neighbor to the library. Lee Ann told me something like: I thought to myself, I wonder what they have in there. Maybe they’ve got something for me. And then she went inside and inquired at R/W/N. But the thing is, she hadn’t really spent time in libraries before. And I remember being struck by how big of a move this was for a person who wore the label of non-literate to walk into a library—the place of reading—and to be able to claim that place: this is going to become *my* place, the place where I read and study. It seems very scary and powerful.

Lauren

Lauren –

I had a student, Manuel, who was a preacher and a plumber and an African American man in his 50s, who quit an already limited schooling at 11 to work in the fields, and who, when I met him, couldn’t read at all. But he was the most mesmerizing and charismatic speaker I have ever heard, and could work a room like no one I’ve ever met. He grew to be a great friend of mine, and I used to bring him to



my classes to talk about his experiences as a non-literate adult. One time, he visited a linguistics class I was teaching with a linguistics professor and, after his class session (which was wonderful) while we were walking away, the professor asked Manuel how learning to read had helped make him a better plumber. Manuel, who had made a good living as a plumber but had been stymied by the written test when he moved to Seattle (in Texas it had only been practical) said, “It didn’t make me a better plumber.” My professor persisted: surely, he said, it must have helped you read code or policy documents, or understand the work more comprehensively. Manuel was clear and concise: No, it didn’t. My professor later said to me, “I don’t think he quite understood what I was asking,” but I never doubted that Manuel understood exactly what he was asking. He simply refused to accept the frame behind it because from his perspective his skills as a plumber had nothing to do with his ability to read.

I thought of Manuel after your last post because after one of his visits I gave him a tour of the University of Washington campus, and we went into the library, and he was stunned, speechless (rare for him) by the sheer number of books, by the extent of the literacy it represented. It was such a foreign environment. It wasn’t intimidation—he found a sort of joy in it—but it was a view of the world that he had simply never imagined before, and he spoke about it as having a powerful effect for him about how he understood reading and writing and access.

Kirk

Kirk,

I keep going back to the idea you framed of adult learners as literacy theorists. We could probably go back and forth for longer than



we have already with one story after another about the ways adult learners have confronted both their social positioning as “illiterates” and the dominant conception of literacy as “cultural goodness.” The stories people tell about their literacy experiences challenge dominant conceptions of a just and equal society; yet at the same time, much of what adult learners claim to seek are the dominant literacy narratives they believe they have been denied.

You and I try to capture and reproduce these stories in our research so that people in positions of power (educators and policy makers) might listen to the wisdom expressed by those who have been deemed “illiterate” and be influenced by their knowledge. When adult learners articulate alternative literacy narratives, and when they write texts that tell a different story from the dominant literacy narratives that have positioned them as non-literate, they begin to challenge that positioning through the act of re-storying. My research continually shows me how strong the desire is to re-story one’s experiences by telling and writing narratives. And I don’t mean narratives of transformation in which the magic of literacy is celebrated. I mean stories like George and Lee Ann and Manuel’s—critical, honest, probing stories—that reveal perspectives that have been kept hidden.