1-1-1992

Literacy Networks: Toward Cultural Studies of Writing and Tutoring

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Writing centers are often thought of as important research sites because they offer the opportunity to study extended dialogues between tutors and tutees—conversations that do not normally take place in teacher-student conferences because of the limits of time or the interference of the teacher's position of authority. The relationship between tutor and tutee, precisely because it is usually not entangled in the reward system of grading and evaluation, appears to present us with a relatively "uncontaminated" social matrix to study the naturally occuring language of students struggling with their writing. Writing tutorials, as Mike Rose's book *Lives on the Boundary* reveals, can be good places for researchers to learn a certain kind of patience, to acquire the ability to wait, and to listen to what students say about their encounters with literacy and their purposes for writing—to "catch . . . the clue," as Rose puts it, "that would reveal . . . the intelligence of the student's mistake" (172).

For these reasons, we often think of the interactions which take place in writing centers as dyadic ones between a tutor and a tutee. Muriel Harris's book *Teaching One-to-One* is a good example of the concern for dialogue and conferencing writing centers have made so central to their purposes and practices. What I would like to suggest, however, is that we might profitably expand this frame of reference to see tutoring not simply as a dyadic relationship between tutors and tutees but as part of the wider social and cultural networks that shape students' emergence into literacy.

Lives on the Boundary reveals over and over again what scholars in literacy studies have been telling us. Shirley Brice Heath, Sarah Michaels, Courtney Cazden, Frederick Erickson, Ron Scollon and Suzanne Scollon, Brian Street and other literacy theorists and classroom ethnographers have shown how students' indigenous or home literacies—the orientations and attitudes toward reading and writing children acquire before entering school—conflict and mesh with the preferred positions of reading and writing in schooled literacy. The ways in which home literacies enable and constrain students' success in school has been well documented. What we don't know as much about, though, is what becomes of students' non-schooled encounters with reading and writing once they enter school. Schooled literacy, after all, does not eliminate home literacy or prevent students from creating their own self-sponsored forms of reading and writing. Rather, schooled literacy, as it were, drives these kinds of popular literacies underground where they take on a shadowy existence at the margins of a student's academic experience. I want to suggest that writing centers offer unusually promising sites to foster conversations about students' experience with a broad range of literacy practices and about the literacy networks they are plugged into, both in and out of school.

I want to use the metaphor "networks" here to describe the multiple ways social experience brings individuals and groups into contact with written texts and how these encounters shape orientations and attitudes toward the production and use of writing. The schooling system, the universities, the state, mass media, advertising, the professions, the managerial class that administers late capitalism have each articulated intertwined yet relatively autonomous literacy networks. These networks—and here I mean everything from NBC, ABC, and CBS to the networking yuppies and computers are notorious for—combine interdiscursively in an always precarious disequilibrium, in an ongoing war of positions to articulate the official meaning of literacy and the preferred constructions of reading and writing. Our students are inevitably plugged into these networks, into the intertextual realities of contemporary mass-mediated culture, and they are constantly piecing together a sense of themselves as listeners and spectators, readers and writers from the runaway mulitiplicity of images, narratives, and cultural codes that characterize what Vachel Lindsay called America's "hieroglyphic civilization." As Jerome Harste and his co-workers have suggested, emergence into literacy is a socio-semiotic activity by which small children learn how language makes meaning by reading (before they are able to read) the environmental print that surrounds them, on signs, cereal boxes, logos,

television screens, and so on. Our students have a practical knowledge of literacy and a wide range of the uses of language that extends far beyond the discourse communities of schooling and academia.

To be plugged into these literacy networks, however, does not necessarily mean one knows how to read and write. Community studies of literacy networks have revealed a wide range of self-help strategies and forms of mutual aid the non-literate and marginally literate rely upon to learn the news of the day and to find out what's in personal and official letters, school notices, work rules and memos on the job, union pamphlets, church and community newsletters, and so on (cf. Fingeret and Heath). One of the most striking representations of such popular literacy networks that I know of takes place in the novel *Iola Leroy*, an early twentieth-century novel by the African American feminist Frances E. W. Harper. The novel opens near the end of the Civil War with a group of slaves meeting clandestinely out in the woods late at night to hear the one literate slave among their numbers read them newspaper accounts of the progress southward of the Union Army—to calculate the moment they can safely escape to join the Union forces and to take part in the general strike of slaves W. E. B. Dubois saw as so important to the defeat of the South.

What I am trying to suggest here is that people have always been quite inventive about using literacy—or in the case of African American slave culture of "stealing" it—to cope with the practical problems and circumstances of everyday life and to pursue their joint purposes. We can learn a lot, I think, if we pay attention not only to our students' relationship to schooled literacy but also to the ways individuals and groups make literacy popular by using reading and writing to create practices and networks that evade or resist the dominant ones. Making literacy popular, as John Fiske suggests, operates at the micropolitical level of everyday life. Such popular practices, as Fiske says, are "concerned with the day-to-day negotiation of unequal power relations in such structures as the family, the immediate work environment, and the classroom" (56). In other words, the popular "is concerned with redistributing power within these structures toward the disempowered" (Fiske 56), with carving out cultural spaces for self-determined activity within a managed social order.

Popular reading and writing practices, I am convinced, are richly and complexly embedded in our students' lives in ways which we are only beginning to imagine and which often are largely irrelevant or positively dysfunctional to their encounters with schooled literacy. Our students, that is, possess a kind of experiential knowledge of literacy practices and networks

that may have little connection to their identities and disciplined labors as students. There is, for example, probably more self-sponsored writing that goes on in students' lives than we know about or understand very well. Our students themselves think that the kind of reading and writing they do on their own, unassigned, outside of school, for their own interest or pleasure, doesn't count, and so they keep it segregated from their academic experience. I'm always amazed at the stories my students tell of why they write and what purposes writing serves for them. They write letters to maintain relationships and keep journals and diaries or write poetry to blow off steam or gain perspective on their feelings. They pass notes in class to create mini-networks right under the teacher's gaze. They write graffitti on bathroom walls, in locker rooms, on the sides of buildings. A surprising number of students write fiction—to invent new worlds and cope with this one. A student recently described how he and his friends met regularly during high school to work collaboratively on an ongoing science fiction tale—how they formed, that is, a small literary subculture to resist the tedium of the official curriculum. And by the same token, students also give accounts of how they have used reading—late at night with a flashlight under the covers or by putting a comic book or magazine inside a textbook in school—to evade the administered order of adult society and to create spaces for their own pleasure.

My evidence here, of course, is anecdotal but it suggests to me, at least, that there is a good deal we can learn about how our students use literacy and represent themselves as readers and writers. The point is that the ways in which students make reading and writing into popular practices exceeds the preferred practices and subject positions of schooled literacy. Reading and writing, as Roland Barthes has indicated so eloquently, are realms of pleasure that are constantly overspilling the official boundaries and disciplinary procedures of school, the family, the state.

To think of the ways students make literacy popular and the ways they participate in literacy networks that extend in and out of school raises a number of interesting questions that might otherwise not occur to us. We might ask, for example:

1. What kinds of self-sponsored reading and writing do students actually do? How do these practices insert students into wider non-academic literacy networks? What purposes do these networks serve for individuals and groups? How do students represent these activities and networks to themselves? How do they fit

into, evade, resist the dominant academic representations of literacy and what it means to be a literate person?

2.   What social processes constitute schooled literacy and student writers? To what extent does schooled literacy accommodate, ignore, or suppress other styles of literacy, other literacy networks, other self-representations of reading and writing? To what extent does literacy outside of academic channels interfere with a mastery of schooled literacy? To what extent does it—or might it— facilitate schooled literacy? What is the relationship between popular and academic literacy?

3.   Finally, we might look toward historical studies of literacy networks, both in and out of school, as Anne Ruggles Gere has done in her book *Writing Groups*. How have groups and individuals incorporated reading and writing into their everyday lives? What purposes do these practices serve? What literacy networks do they articulate? What forms of practical knowledge do individuals and groups draw upon to participate in literacy networks? How are these forms of knowledge produced and distributed? How have readers and writers represented themselves?

The point of such studies, I think, is to give us a fuller picture of the experiences that determine how our students encounter literacy and what popular repertoires individuals and groups have used—currently and in the past—to incorporate reading and writing into their everyday lives. These are important issues for writing centers, in part, as Mike Rose shows repeatedly in *Lives on the Boundary*, because tutoring sessions are never really just dyadic encounters between tutors and tutees: our students' popular encounters with literacy make up invisible presences at the scene of writing and tutoring, at times conflicting with and at times accommodating the demands of academic literacy. For this reason, it is important, I think, to materialize these invisible networks and the differences in cultural orientation toward the literacy students bring with them into writing centers.

I can't think of a place as ideally situated as writing centers to carry on the kinds of extended conversation necessary for students to make sense of their popular experiences as readers and writers. And accordingly, we need to train tutors to be anthropologists as much as clinicians—so they can learn how to wait and listen, how to keep the conversation going in the informant's own words, how to make tutoring sessions microethnographies as well as

interventions. But, of course, again as Mike Rose's book reveals, this is exactly what writing centers have been doing all along. Once again, in the feedback loop that runs up from writing centers to the faculty who study and teach writing, our students are explaining to us just how complicated and how interesting their emergence into literacy really is.

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