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brendaly e. drayton

pennsylvania state university university park pa, bed156@psu.edu

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Exploring the Relationship Between Religious Faith and Persistence Through Intertextuality

Brendaly Drayton
The Pennsylvania State University

Abstract: This paper draws upon intertextuality to explore *how* an African American male adult learner uses his religious faith as a resource for persisting in an adult literacy program. The findings indicate that his religious faith was not simply a coping mechanism but a resource for redefining learner identity.

Keywords: African-American men, intertextuality, identity, literacy, spirituality

Religious faith is not only a means of making sense of one's circumstances but coping and gaining control of them (Park, 2005). It shapes self-perception and influences our experiences, goals, values, and attitudes (Kiesling, Sorell, Montgomery, & Colwell, 2006). Adult education research has emphasized religious faith and spirituality as an influence for social justice practice, as a component of cultural pedagogy in higher and workforce education, as a means of transformative learning, as an impetus for literacy development, and as a coping resource for marginalized individuals in educational settings (English, 2005; English, Fenwick, & Parsons, 2003; Prins, 2001; Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000; Tisdell, 2003; 2008; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003). While scholarship on the relationship between religious faith or spirituality and learning is growing in higher education and work place learning, it has focused primarily on educators' experience and pedagogy. In addition, its significance has been underexplored in adult literacy research. This paper contributes to the literature by using intertextuality to explore *how* an African American male adult learner uses his religious faith as a resource for persisting in an adult literacy program. The findings of this case study indicate that religious faith was not simply a coping mechanism but a resource for redefining learner identity. The overarching goal of this paper is to expand our understanding of motivational factors that promote learning.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

While there is a growing body of work on black men and spirituality in higher education, there are few if any studies on black men and religious faith in adult literacy programs. Because of the paucity of research in this area, I draw upon studies in higher education to lay a background for exploring this topic in adult literacy. Research shows that African American students with strong religious beliefs often use them as a basis for problem solving (Constantine, Wilton, Gainor, & Lewis, 2002) and as a means of coping with stress in academic settings (Walker & Dixon, 2002). In addition, Riggins, McNeal, and Herndon (2008) found that spirituality was a factor in black college men's persistence and completion of collegiate programs. Combined, these findings warrant an exploration of the relationship between religious faith and learning in the context of the African American adult learner experience. While extant research shows religious faith and spirituality as a resource rarely does it show or explicate the meaning-making process that takes place.

Adult education literature makes a distinction between spirituality and religion (Tisdell, 2003) but for many of religious faith the two are intimately connected (Milacci, 2006). In general, research on African American spirituality tends to connect spirituality to relationship

with a divine other (Constantine, Wilton, Gainor, & Lewis, 2002; Newlin, Knafl, & Melkus, 2002). Acknowledging the intra-diversity of culture and religious experience, I draw upon Newlin, Knafl, and Melkus' (2002) interdisciplinary concept of African-American spirituality as "faith in an omnipotent, transcendent force; experienced internally and/or externally as caring interconnectedness with others, God, or a higher power; manifested as empowering transformation of and liberating consolation for life's adversities; and thereby inspiring fortified belief in and reliance on the benevolent source of unlimited potential." (p. 65). Consequently, the degree of identification will inform the meaning-making process of daily lived experiences and influence aspirations, goals, and behaviors. In addition, I utilize a social practices view of literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 2000) that recognizes the cultural context shapes what literacies are valued and how they are used. I define a literate identity as the sense of efficacy in meeting expectations of society in terms of knowledge and skill in valued mediums of communication.

Research Design

Utilizing the case study (Stake, 2005) of Raymond, a 56 year old African American male literacy learner, I explore how religious identity can influence engagement and persistence in an adult learning program. The case study resulted from a larger study that examined the literacy experiences of African American men who were participating in an adult literacy program in a large northeastern city (Drayton, 2012). Primary data sources were three in-depth interviews that were recorded and transcribed. I used narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993; 2008) to discover the identities Raymond constructed and to explore how he made sense of his experiences. In particular, I used intertextuality (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009) to unveil the authoritative discourses Raymond aligned with and resisted in his pursuit of literacy development.

Generally speaking, intertextuality is a mixing of text from different environments (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). It highlights the social and historical sources narrators rely on to construct their narratives (Fairclough, 1992). Words in a given narrative includes other texts and associated meanings in its construction as in the case of Raymond who used scripture references to make sense of his literacy experiences. As Gubrium & Holstein (2009) note, narratives are "intertextual productions sharing the empirical stage with other stories" and therefore requires the development of sensibilities to intra- and inter-environmental connections including how past experiences and anticipated future shape present accounts (p. 187). The three questions I asked of the intertextual references were 1) what is being referred to? 2) What function or role does each reference play in the data? 3) How does my "insider" status affect or influence my understanding of the meaning of the references (Gee, 2011)? The participant's awareness of my insider status as a former tutor in the program and a member of the church that sponsored the program may have contributed to the comfort level of the participant as well as the content of the narrative. In addition, my insider identity influenced my understanding of particular cultural and religious phrasing and references.

Findings

Raymond did not identify practicing his religious faith as the primary motivation for participating in the adult learning program; yet he establishes the connection between his ability to read and his religious faith. Riessman (1997) notes that "the way individuals craft their tales including the narrative genres they use carry crucial interpretive understandings" (p. 157). Raymond's narrative indicates that his religious faith positioned him to reject a disabled-learner identity, to claim a capable learner identity and a future literate identity, and to persist in the

program to achieve his goal of learning to read.

Claiming a Competent Learner Identity

During his two years in the program Raymond progressed from a third grade to fifth grade reading level. He came to the current program with a background of failed attempts at learning how to read in the public school system and in at least one prior adult education program. In addition he carried the pain of the poignant experience of being labeled a “dummy” by the teacher and students in his third grade class. In the following excerpt, Raymond resisted authoritative voices that labeled him as having a reading disability that prevented him from learning and aligned with the authoritative voice anchored in scripture that caused him to believe he would learn how to read.

01 Right now they say I have ah um ah ah disability--reading disability. I'm not going 02 to learn. But I'm not going to stop. I'm not going to stop just because you say I'm 03 not, God tells me something different, you understand? I'm going to go by God's
04 word and not your word. So I see little things I can read. Like little words I can read. 05 So if I could read that there, it'd get better. Just take my time, you understand?
06 Rome was not built in one day. Rome was not built in one day. I know my Father
07 said whatever I ask for in Jesus name, I shall receive it in the name of Jesus Christ,
08 but it's not going to be on my time. It's going to be in God's time. And he using
09 Jane and them to do that, you know and I'm a good student. I have patience. I could 10 wait you know. Something going to come out of it.

The “they” (line 01) Raymond refers to in the first sentence are those who had diagnosed him as having a reading disability that constrained him to a low-literate identity without possibility of change. Although Raymond related the story to me his narrative shifts to where he talked to those who had labeled him (lines 02-04). Here Raymond demonstrates an aspect of multivoicedness in which the narrator converses with the listener as well as the ghosts of his past events (Wortham, 2001). He stated, “Just because you say I'm not, God tells me something different, you understand? I'm going to go by God's word and not your word.” The first you refers to the “they” of the past, the second you draws me, the listener, in seeking my understanding, the your in the last sentence refers back to the “they” of the past. Raymond juxtaposes two authoritative contradicting voices: Those who had the power to label him and the word of the God he believed in. He then declared which voice he chose to listen to: “I'm going to go by God's word and not your word.”

Raymond then constructed a rationale for what he believed. First, he referred to the lived experience of being able to learn words which was an indication to him that he could learn to read more (lines 04-05). Second, he understood that it required an investment of time to reach his goal drawing upon the analogy of the great city of Rome not being built in a day (line 06). His repetition of the phrase implies the significance of meaning (Gee, 2011) or his heightened awareness that learning to read will take a long time. Then he quotes the scriptural text John 15:16 declaring God's promise of provision (lines 06-08). Note that Raymond does not use the impersonal term God but establishes the relationship of father and son. He uses the possessive “My father” portraying his understanding of the benevolent Father who provides for His son and would bring about “empowering transformation” (Newlin, Knafl, and Melkus (2002); yet, this transformation to a literate future identity would be accomplished in “God's time” not his (line 07). Thus, his expectation of success propels him to claim the identity of the capable learner - the good and patient student.

Persistence

The strength of Raymond's belief, anchored in his relationship to the benevolent transcendent Other (Newlin, Knafl, and Melkus' (2002), shaped his behavior and determination to achieve his goal. The future selves construct (Rossiter, 2007) points out that the degree to which one envisions or believes in a future self shapes behavior. In lines 01-02, Raymond repeatedly voiced his determination "not to stop" attending the program. This prefaced the rationale for his decision as outlined in the previous section. Raymond concluded the narrative segment by describing himself as a good and patient student - two characteristics necessary to achieve his goal. Thus, supporting his expectation that "something going to come out of it" (line 10). In addition, he saw the tutors as resources God was using to help him learn to read (lines 08-09). In another narrative segment, Raymond further substantiates his determination to remain in the program by contrasting himself to 10 other men who came into the program with him and dropped out. He also indicated that he had every reason to stay because he was doing well and that he tried "not to miss no days" despite the effects of various ailments. Raymond outlasted the program. It closed after my second interview with him. He was in the process of looking for another program to fulfill his dream of learning to read. In sum, Raymond pointed to his behavior as evidence of his belief that he would succeed.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is not to promote a religious agenda but rather to discuss the significance of engaging with the adult learner as a whole person. This study contributes to the possible selves construct (Rossiter, 2007) in showing that a facilitative factor or activator between the dream of a possible self and the behavior necessary to accomplish the goal can be faith in a transcendent beneficial Other that promotes an envisioning of the self which pushes beyond the boundaries of socially constructed limited "repertoire of possible selves" (p. 88). Raymond challenges the view that the "faithful is out of place in a context that celebrates the restless curiosity of the learner" (Newman, 2014, p. 348). Raymond made sense of his literacy experiences through the eyes of his faith. His desire to learn and the actions taken to learn in the face of authoritative voices to the contrary were mediated by his religious faith. And as Newman (2014) goes on to point out, "Life is an accidental and exciting opportunity to make meaning, and the aim of good adult education is to help both learners and teachers take full advantage of that opportunity" (p. 353).

Identities are positions from which we speak (Hall, 1990). This study shows that identities are interconnected, in this case the learner and religious identities, and can strengthen each other. Consequently, religious faith should not be overlooked as a source of resilience and empowerment in helping adult learners achieve their goals. Interdisciplinary research affirms the significance of religious faith in African American culture, progress, and education (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Newlin, Knafl, & Melkus, 2002) and should be considered part of a culturally relevant pedagogy.

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