

Third Space Theory: Reconceptualizing Content Literacy Learning

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Abstract: This paper develops, through a literature review, a conceptual framework for a study in process of the literacy views and practices of youth offenders. The framework offers a reconceptualized view of literacy to increase opportunities for content literacy learning with marginalized youth.

Twenty-first century literacy in the United States is a paradoxical phenomenon evident in the discrepancy between youths' in-school and out-of-school literacy engagement and success.

In-School Literacy

In-school literacy is defined and sustained by current legislation, government reports, and regular mass media stories about failure in literacy (Strickland & Alvermann, 2004). The notion of illiteracy supports an autonomous model of literacy based on a predetermined set of cognitive skills and competencies. An autonomous model of literacy is a "neutral" mechanism for achieving functional ends...to ensure the mechanical functioning of [the state's] institutions" (Street, 1997, p. 11). According to this view, people who are marginalized, or unsuccessful, in school fail to reach the correct literacy standards (Pardoe, 2000).

Out-of-School Literacy

Out-of-school literacy, on the other hand, is a dynamic construct developed by youth and their communities. Literacy occurs in everyday cultural, social, linguistic, and community contexts. Youth proactively engage in and successfully learn new literacies with social networks in particular situations for authentic reasons (e.g., spoken-word performance, My Space). An ideological model of literacy acknowledges literacy as social practices, embedded in culture and power relationships (Street, 1997). The multiple resources, or everyday funds of knowledge (e.g., prior knowledge, cultural practices), that students bring to school and draw on to try to make sense of classroom texts are valued as important influences on how oral and written texts are understood or produced in and out of school (Moll, 1992).

Statement of the Problem

Culturally responsive teaching is an ideological approach for in-school literacy learning used successfully with younger students, but is underutilized with youth, ages 14 to 18 (Lee, 2005). Culturally responsive teachers are aware of, place value on, and build on the everyday "funds of knowledge and Discourse that shape and inform literate practice of youth learners" (Moje & Hinchman, 2004, p. 322). Discourses with a capital "D" (Gee, 1996) are shared ways of knowing "thinking, believing, acting, and communicating" (Moje & Lewis, 2007, p. 3) that are present in and out of school and influence how people teach and learn in school. Responsive teachers continually draw from students' everyday funds and Discourses to integrate "different, and sometimes competing, academic and everyday knowledges and Discourses" (Moje et al., 2004, p. 42). Integrating funds is essential when teachers and their students draw from different backgrounds and experiences.

The field of youth content literacy has begun to focus on how youths' out-of-school literacy practices may inform in-school literacy learning (Strickland & Alvermann, 2004). Literacy practices and Discourses of incarcerated youth have rarely been studied (Wilson, 2003).

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Literacy practices and Discourses of youth offenders—a particular culture of other students who are in-between incarceration and education—have not been studied.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptualized with critical social theory (Foucault, 1977; Freire, 1970) and hybridity theory (Bhabha, 1994; Soja, 1996), third space theory (Lefebvre, 1991) will frame this study. Third space theory (Lefebvre, 1991) is (a) situated in postcolonial Discourse, (b) related to culturally responsive teaching, (c) defined by power relations, and (d) applicable to marginalized youth literacy learning.

Critical Social Theory

A critical social theory of literacy reconceptualizes literacy learning as an ideological construct rather than as an autonomous set of cognitive skills students possess or lack. Literacy practices are (a) culturally constructed and historically situated, (b) representative of people's social identities, and (c) produced in and shaped by social institutions and power relationships. Some "literacies [e.g., Standard English] are more dominant, visible, and influential than others [e.g., vernacular language]" (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 12).

Hybridity Theory

Hybridity theory acknowledges the difficulty of examining people's different "spaces and literacies" (Moje et al., 2004, p. 42). People in any community are assumed to have access to and draw from multiple funds or resources to make sense of the world. Being "in-between" (Moje et al., 2004, p. 1) various funds of knowledge and Discourses can be both fruitful and limiting for development of identities and literate, social, and cultural practices.

Third Space Theory

Third space theory, like hybridity theory, reconceptualizes the first and second spaces of human interaction (Moje et al., 2004). First and second spaces are binary, often competing, categories where people interact physically and socially. Binaries in literacy are the first and second spaces of everyday versus academic knowledges. Third spaces are the in-between, or hybrid, spaces where the seemingly oppositional first and second spaces work together to generate new third space knowledges, Discourses, and literacy forms.

Situated in postcolonial Discourse. Drawing from postcolonial Discourse, third space challenges the fixed notions of certain signs and symbols which represent the dominant views of culture and language. Third space generates new interpretations of both everyday and academic knowledges as it is "produced in and through language as people come together" (Moje et al., 2004, p. 43). The struggle to integrate competing knowledges and Discourses can be fruitful if the people are not defined according to the dominant Discourse.

Related to culturally responsive teaching. Third space can be used to explore literacy learning as a bridge, or scaffold, and navigational tool to move students through their zones of proximal development from marginalized (e.g., everyday) to privileged (e.g., dominant) content academic knowledges and Discourses (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejada, 2003). Furthermore, third space can be used in ways to "challenge, destabilize, and expand literacy practices that are typically valued in school" (Moje et al., 2004, p. 44).

Defined by power relations. Third space theory is practical for studying the complexity of spaces populated by groups of unequal power (Wilson, 2003). It has been used to understand the dissonance between the first space of official prison discourse and the second spaces of prisoners' intense, unvoiced thoughts about families, identities, and time. For example, juveniles used third spaces they created while incarcerated (e.g., writing letters and poetry, taping greeting cards to cell walls) to reflect on life with new possibilities.

Applied to marginalized youth literacy learning. The construction of third space in the field of youth content literacy learning “merges the ‘first space’ of people’s home, community, and peer networks with the ‘second space’ of the Discourses they encounter in more formalized institutions such as...school...” (Moje et al., 2004, p. 41). In this study, first space will be the space which is marginalized—the everyday world and literacy views and practices common to juvenile offenders; second space will be the privileged or dominant space of the official curriculum in an alternative education program (Wilson, 2003).

Literature Review

The New Literacy Studies (NLS) and Youth Literacies, Cultures, and Identities (YLCI) Studies support the framework for this study.

The New Literacy Studies

The NLS challenge taken-for-granted deficit accounts of literacy found in mass media, political discourse, and research (Pardoe, 2000). In the NLS, “reading, writing, and meaning are always situated within specific social practices within specific Discourses” (Gee, 2000, p. 189) and focus on the idea that reading and writing make sense only when studied in the context of social, cultural, historical, political, and economic practices rather than of individual cognitive tasks. Recent NLS focus on “local situated literacies [where local means] the site at which people – in tandem with words, deeds, objects, tools, symbols, settings, times, and ways of being, doing, thinking, and valuing – work out...work on...and rework the projects” (Gee, 2000, p. 194).

Youth Literacies, Cultures, and Identities Studies

YLCI studies support a critical sociocultural stance which suggests that literacy is found in multiple contexts and forms, makes sense to those involved, and is “always part of other social, cultural, and political practices, and is therefore, never autonomous or decontextualized” (Moje, draft, in press, 2007, p. 5). YLCI approaches begin with what youth already and want to know, do, read, and write outside of what they struggle with in academic literacy learning. The focus is on “what and why texts matter to youth and on how youth texts and literacy practices might inform academic literacy development” (Moje, draft, in press, 2007, p. 1). The notion of the so-called *struggling* secondary reader and writer and how to teach them is reconsidered. All students from mainstream and nonmainstream backgrounds are assumed to bring rich funds of knowledge, cultural practices, and Discourses to school.

Purpose of the Study

This critical ethnographic study will describe how interactions among Discourses within the classroom cultures of an alternative school inform teachers’ pedagogies and youth offenders’ in-school literacy learning.

Research Questions

The primary research questions are: How do Discourses interact within the classroom cultures of an alternative education school for youth offenders? How do interactions among Discourses inform teachers’ pedagogies and youth offenders’ in-school literacy learning?

Research Design

This critical ethnographic study will embed an ecologically valid design (Lee, 2005), the methodological principle of symmetry (Pardoe, 2000), and critical sociocultural methods of analysis for literacy learning (Moje & Lewis, 2007) within five recommended stages of critical ethnographic, or qualitative, research (Carspecken, 1996). Ecologically valid designs are sensitive to the uniqueness of real students in real situations with real teachers. The principle of symmetry validates marginalized youths’ literacy practices and texts as rational, coherent, and true in specific contexts rather than dismissing them as unsuccessful in deficit terms.

Critical Ethnographic Research

Critical ethnography is a particular genre of qualitative social research framed within critical social theory (Carspecken, 1996). Qualitative social researchers attempt to “understand, interpret, and explain complex and highly contextualized social phenomena such as classroom cultures” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 17) by focusing on the meanings and practices involved in how people experience themselves in their worlds. Critical epistemology links power, knowledge, and truth. Critical ethnography emphasizes the innovative production of cultural themes and cultural structures from social actors (Carspecken, 1996).

Research Stages

Five recommended stages of critical ethnographic research are (a) data collection for the primary record, (b) preliminary reconstructive analysis, (c) dialogical data generation, (d) examination of systems relations, and (e) explanation of findings (Carspecken, 1996).

Data Collection and Analysis

“Stages one through three emphasize social integration...four and five emphasize system integration and the relationship between social and system integration” (Carspecken, 1996, p. 190). In stage four, several related sites will be examined; in stage five, findings will be explained through social-theoretical models and may yield revisions. For this study, ethnographic methods will document the details of people, actions, things, and accounts to enable the researcher to articulate specific literacy practices, events, and Discourses of people in a classroom culture rather than their skills and competencies (Maybin, 2000). Details will enable the researcher to clearly express the link between everyday literacies and the social institutions and power relations that are more dominant than them.

Data Collection

Passive observations will be the method for compiling the primary record, using a primary record notebook and a field journal as recording tools. Methods for generating dialogical data will be (a) interviews, using an interview protocol for guidance; (b) group discussions; (c) artifacts, such as written texts produced by students, body literacy, and clothing (Moja et al., 2004); and (d) Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR), with videotapes as the recording tool. IPR solicits metacognitive thoughts from participants (Carspecken, 1996).

Analysis

Critical sociocultural theory, informed by cultural historical activity, critical discourse, and cultural studies theories, provides the rationale for analysis in this study. Cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) highlights how hybrid contexts mediate teaching and learning, calling for practice and activity to be the units of analysis (Lee & Ball, 2005). Critical discourse theory provides tools for understanding how interactions among Discourses both shape and are informed by power relationships and ideologies in people’s learning lives. Cultural studies provides a basis for studying cultural practices from the people’s perspectives and for recognizing that power is produced in everyday lives in and through societal institutions.

Various types of interactions in the classroom will be coded, pulled together into themes, and categorized through rigorous reconstructive principles (Carspecken, 1996). Systems analysis is open to as many cultural contributions as possible, influenced by cultural, political, and economic power. For example, hybrid examples of counterscripts, often considered off task Discourse in classrooms, will be analyzed as third space opportunities for learning situated in content area literacy (Gutiérrez et al., 2003).

Findings, Results, and Implications

This study will contribute to third space theory and critical sociocultural literacy research with implications for curriculum development and teacher preparation.

Third Space Theory

Third space may be developed most fully by building on everyday and/or popular culture funds linked to academic funds (Lee, 2005). In this study, multiple outside-of-school texts may be tools for connecting youth offenders to the commonly unwelcoming official space of content area literacy learning (Strickland, & Alvermann, 2004).

Critical Sociocultural Literacy Research

Attempts will be made to connect youth offenders' everyday funds, ethnic identity, and Discourses of community networking to academic content area funds as they relate to the social, political, and economic realm. For example, marginalized youth whose families worked in the dry cleaning or farming business understood the implications of poor water quality on their lives even when the academic concepts were taught as simple definitions (Moje et al., 2004).

Curriculum Development

Insights may be yielded into developing and enacting responsive curricula and teaching for youth offenders when the current focus for all students is on high-stakes accountability measures and discipline. The ways everyday funds do or do not connect to academic funds have implications for curriculum development and for developing third space "in which everyday and school knowledges and Discourses inform one another" (Moje et al., 2004, p. 64).

Teacher Preparation

Teacher preparation programs which address ways for engaging, supporting, and enhancing youth offenders' literacy learning by linking out-of-school literacies with in-school literacy expectations are nonexistent. It is rare for students, especially youth offenders, to volunteer their everyday funds unless the teacher understands deeply and welcomes hybridity and third space in the classroom. Teachers who actively construct third space (a) understand literacy as a complex construct which consists of social and cultural practices, and (b) are able to connect academic content to the lives of their students and help them strategically renegotiate knowledge for increased opportunities in learning (Gutiérrez et al., 2003).

This study offers practical implications for teacher preparation. Teachers can be encouraged to "confront why they think as they do about themselves as teachers— especially in relation to the social, cultural, political, economic, and historical world around them" (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 155). Critically reflecting on how one's ethnic identities and Discourses have been socially constructed can empower teachers to be able to reconceptualize literacy learning and, subsequently, transform their own lives and the lives of their students.

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