

Identity Work and Cultural Artefacts in Literacy Learning and Use: A Sociocultural Analysis

Lesley Bartlett

Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W 120th Street, Box 55, New York, NY 10027

This paper aims to contribute a sociocultural theoretical perspective for the creative identity work involved in the ongoing process of learning and using literacies. Drawing on anthropological theories of identity formation, I argue that people employ cultural resources, such as cultural artefacts, to develop new identities and literacies. I illuminate these processes by drawing examples from interviews with adult literacy students in Brazil and current literature in sociocultural studies of literacy.

Keywords: cultural artefacts, identity, literacy

Recent research has heavily emphasised the bidirectionality of the relationship between literacy and identity (Bean & Moni, 2003; Gee, 2000/2001; Mahiri & Godley, 1998; McCafferty, 2002; McCarthey, 2001; McCarthey & Moje, 2002; Rymes, 2001). These studies tend to examine literacy in relation to social structures and/or culture and meaning-making, as recommended by Brian Street in his manifesto for sociocultural studies of literacy (Street, 1984). In relation to social structures, and building on a strong tradition in the fields of language and literacy studies, scholars of literacy have reconsidered the link between literacies, class, race/ethnicity, nationality and gender (Blackburn, 2002/2003; Fecho & Green, 2002; Finders, 1997; Gilyard, 2000, 1999; Jimenez, 2000; Li, 2002; Luttrell, 1989; Norton, 2000; Robinson-Pant, 2001; Rockhill, 1993; Smitherman, 1977; Solsken, 1993; Street, 1993; Wagner, 1983). At the same time, critical literacy theorists have emphasised the need for students to explore, in and through literacy, the normative structures, institutions and discourses that maintain unequal social relations (Hagood, 2002; Hull, 1993; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Muspratt *et al.*, 1997; Shor, 1999). In relation to cultural studies of literacy, one of the most fruitful developments is the current emphasis on the interplay between popular culture and literacy practices (Allen & Ingulsrud, 2003; Alvermann & Heron, 2001; Alvermann *et al.*, 1999; Dyson, 1993, 1997; Hilton, 1996; Morrell, 2002). Despite the recent flourish, too often these studies fail to theorise the relationship between cultural and social elements of literacy, or the possible mechanisms for the ongoing, shifting production of literate identities and microlevel social change.

In this paper, I aim to contribute to and expand sociocultural theoretical perspectives in recent research on identity and literacy. Drawing on anthropological theories of identity, I argue that the ongoing process of learning and employing literacies and responding to social positioning requires critical iden-

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tivity work that is accomplished through engagement with cultural artefacts. In what follows, I first summarise the contributions of key texts in New Literacy Studies and social theories of learning to our understanding of the relationship between literacy and identity. Next, I outline the theoretical basis for my emphasis on self-making through cultural artefacts, illustrating the concepts with a story from my fieldwork with Brazilians enrolled in adult literacy programmes. I then apply the theoretical perspective to several key studies in literacy and identity, showing how the framework illuminates work in this area.

Literacies and Identities

Literacies, like other uses of language, entail social identities. Literacy theorist James Gee elucidated the reciprocal relationship between language and identity. Gee demonstrated that 'social languages', or (spoken or written) 'ways with words' that include different styles, registers, vocabularies, and grammars, necessitate socially situated identities (Gee, 1996, 1999). He gave an example of the ongoing linguistic and identity work that Native Americans perform in order to be recognised as 'real Indians', including avoiding conversations with strangers, verbal sparring or 'razzing', and struggling to 'fit in', or not 'elevate themselves over other 'real Indians'' (Gee, 1999: 15–16).

Yet the tight coupling of literacies and identities raises a crucial question: How do people attain new literacies and their attendant social identities? Gee suggested that masterful literacy attainment comes through *acquisition*, or informal, apprentice-style learning, rather than through *learning* or formal instruction. Following Krashen, Gee distinguished between the *acquisition* of Discourses¹ 'by exposure to models, a process of trial and error, and practice within social groups, without formal teaching', and the *learning* of Discourses, which 'involves conscious knowledge gained through teaching (though not necessarily from someone officially designated a teacher) or through certain life-experiences that trigger conscious reflection' (Gee, 1996: 138). He argued that Discourses are '*mastered* through acquisition, not through learning. That is, Discourses are not mastered by overt instruction, but by enculturation (apprenticeship) into social practices through scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered the Discourse' (Gee, 1996: 139). However, Gee suggested that literacy-and-identity acquisition *can* occur in the classroom through 'active apprenticeships in academic social practices', though he stressed that classroom literacy work 'must connect with these social practices as they are also carried on outside the composition or language class . . . ' (Gee, 1996: 147).

The notion of acquiring new knowledges and abilities through apprenticeship also features centrally in the work of contemporary anthropologists and culturally-oriented psychologists. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger defined learning as changing participation in communities of practice (Lave, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Barbara Rogoff argued that cognition develops in sociocultural context and through interaction (Rogoff, 1990; Rogoff & Lave, 1999).

With Gee, Lave, Wenger and Rogoff, in this paper I emphasise the importance of apprenticeship in acquiring new social identities and literacies. To better understand this process, though, I argue that we need to look more closely at the dual nature of identity and the role of cultural resources in identity work.

Positional and Figured Identities

Recent anthropological work has emphasised the social negotiation involved in identity production. In other words, identities are continually constructed not only by one's creative *self-making*, but also by others' *perceptions* of one's self. In their recent book on the topic, and drawing on Bakhtin, Vygotsky and actor-network theory, Holland *et al.* (1998) contrast *positional* and *figured* elements of identities. *Positionality* signifies one's understanding of his or her position in systems of power, hierarchy, or affiliation (Holland *et al.*, 1998: 128). Positionality is 'inextricably linked to power, status, and rank'; it is ascribed by locally relevant social structures such as race, class, gender, age, etc. (271). Positionality, then, is what Gee referred to as 'being recognised as a "certain kind of person"' (Gee, 2000/2001: 99). Yet identity is not only about being recognised or 'passing' as a certain type. Identities also entail *figured* elements, or aspects that relate to culture; they include, for example, symbols and socially shared meanings. Indeed, 'figurative identities are about signs that evoke story lines or plots among generic characters' (Holland *et al.*, 1998: 128). Holland *et al.* suggest that, in practice or what they call the 'space of authoring', actors might use figured elements of identity to surmount the negative social positioning they experience.

One way in which people develop the figured elements of their identities and thus counteract powerful social positioning is through the adoption and use of powerful, compelling cultural resources, or artefacts.

Identities and Cultural Artefacts

Holland *et al.* theorise the central role that *cultural artefacts* play in improvisational identity work. Cultural artefacts are objects, symbols, narratives, or images inscribed by the collective attribution of meaning. Examples of cultural artefacts include the Cinderella story, the crucifix adopted by many Catholic faithful, the image of the rainbow, or labels like 'gifted and talented' or 'slow reader' in classrooms.

Cultural artefacts are essential to identity work. According to Vygotsky's notion of semiotic mediation, such artefacts are central to humans' abilities to modulate their own behaviour, cognition and emotion. From a Vygotskian perspective, through this process of 'heuristic development' – a sort of opportunistic, symbolic bootstrapping – humans achieve a modicum of control over their own behaviour and thus some degree of agency. According to Holland *et al.*, people use artefacts to develop the figured aspects of their identities and thus manage their own feelings, thoughts, behaviour and actions on a broad scale. Over time and in communities of practice, actors masterfully acquire new figured identities.

In relation to literacy, then, the theoretical work by Holland *et al.* suggests that students can use cultural artefacts – images, symbols, discourses, etc. – to modulate their behaviour, cognition, and emotion enough to overcome negative social positioning and become what Bourdieu (1991) might call 'legitimately' literate. This insight enhances the work of Gee, Lave, and Wenger by emphasising the importance in the acquisition/learning process of cultural artefacts as developed and adopted in communities of practice.

Literate Identity Work: An Example

Consider, for example, the following story related to me during my fieldwork with adult literacy students in Brazil.² Eunisa, the woman who told me this story, was a dark-skinned woman of African descent living in a precarious section of a poor state capital in the Northeast of Brazil. At the time of our interview, Eunisa was a 33-year-old, married woman with no children; she was enrolled in an adult literacy programme at the public school. In addition, she was very active in a neighbourhood evangelical church; indeed, the second time I met her, Eunisa gave me a bookmark with a Bible passage painstakingly written by her on the back. She was discussing the limitations placed on her life by not knowing how to read and write. When I asked her to give an example, Eunisa offered the following story:

One day I went to get my Voter's Card (*titulo de eleitor*) [with a group of people] . . . When we arrived, there were a lot of people . . . So we got in line, a lot of us, and a man said, 'Whoever is going to sign, sign here.' And the girl beside me, Betânia . . . said, 'Me, but I'm not going to sign, I'm going to use my fingerprint.' And the man said, 'Here's the "father of the donkeys"' (*pai dos burros*), which was the pad of ink to wet your finger and put in on the [document.] And I got so ashamed, my God, you know? . . . I knew how to write my name, but I had forgotten. My husband, when I would go to do any document, he would write my name on a sheet of paper for me to copy the length of the page, so I could remember. This was before I went back to school . . . [So I prayed,] my God, God help me; help me sign my name because I don't want to be embarrassed. [Betânia] had already finished, and he said to me, 'Come, here's the "father of the donkeys."' I felt so ashamed, and I thought, my God, I'm going to sign my name, one way or another. I said, 'Look, I don't know how to sign well, okay? But I want to try.' Because he had already said that to the other woman, and I felt ashamed . . . He said, 'Do it slowly, that's fine, no problem.' Another guy showed up and said, 'No problem, don't hurry yourself.' So I picked up the pen and signed. My name was kind of crooked but it came out.

The experience of registering to vote is a famously painful one for people who have difficulty signing their names. In Brazil, 'donkey' is a common, dehumanising insult for people who don't know how to read or write. In this routine bureaucratic literacy event, the 'father of the donkeys' inkp pad functioned as a powerful, even dreadful, artefact collectively imbued with meaning that threatened to position Eunisa as animalistic and illiterate. Eunisa evaded this social positioning by invoking her faith and resorting to prayer. Eunisa's figured identity as a devout member of a charismatic Protestant sect that emphasises reading the Bible, sharing the Word of God in written form, and proclaiming one's faith helped her manage the situation and assert her desire to sign her name. She picked up the pen – another artefact with quite a different embodied history and hence meaning – and signed the document.

I argue, then, that the lifelong process of literacy learning relies, in part, on symbolic self-making through the use of cultural artefacts. In other articles, I offer an extensive analysis of the discourses of empowerment and friendship

offered in the Brazilian non-governmental adult literacy programmes that I studied, and the ways in which students responded to those discourses (Bartlett, 2001a, ms). Here, I wish simply to suggest that, in studying literacy, we would be wise to attend to the cultural artefacts made available by literacy classrooms or programmes, and the ways in which students do or do not take up those resources in their identity work.

Identity Work in Sociocultural Studies of Literacy

Cultural artefacts play an important role in the formation of all literacies and identities. Though the previous example emphasised emergent adult literacy in Brazil, the same theoretical framework elucidates literacy and identity work among groups of other ages, cultures, literacy levels, and languages. As I demonstrate in this section, recent work in the field of literacy studies suggests the importance of cultural artefacts in all literacy practices.

Perhaps the best illustration of the importance of identity work through cultural artefacts is provided by Anne Haas Dyson's work on children 'writing superheroes' (Dyson, 1997). In her qualitative, multi-year study of a group of elementary school students, Dyson showed how children appropriated stories from popular culture in their classroom dramatic writing for Author's Theatre. The narratives, plots, and characters from cartoons and other television shows became important cultural artefacts in the children's literacy development and identity work. The students used the stories in two important ways. First, by including certain peers in their dramas, and assigning them more or less desirable roles, the authors sought to build and, in some cases, reinforce their social relationships. Second, children performed roles or characters in order to practise emerging senses of powerful selves. Through the inventive pedagogy of Author's Theatre, the children were literally authoring selves and creating new cultural worlds.

Dyson's excellent work reminds us that artefacts themselves are not innocent, but instead are situated in relations of power. The popular culture narratives on which many students relied were suffused with ideologies. For example, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles stories offered limited roles for girls, and the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers trafficked in race and gender stereotypes. Furthermore, access to symbols is shaped by social position. Students' class-based differences in cultural capital influenced their familiarity with certain cultural narratives; middle class parents were less likely to allow their children to watch the television shows that provided the storylines and characters for much of the dramatic rewriting in the classroom Dyson observed.

Though the cultural artefacts might be limiting in their original form, Dyson showed how they were negotiated and re-authored by the children in practice. Dyson carefully traced the ways in which children resisted the positioning proffered by peers in the dramatisation of certain stories. For example, Dyson examined how Tina, an African-American girl, actively protested the gender inequalities in stories by her peers (Dyson, 1994, 1995). Tina wrote her own, more gender-balanced stories. She wrote some stories with more typically feminine themes of family relations and nurturing relations. And, when participating in play of the fight-based superhero genre, she insisted on more active roles for

herself. As Dyson averred, 'meanings do not come in any direct way from the stories themselves; meanings are constructed and reconstructed in the social world that takes up the story' (Dyson, 1994: 229). Furthermore, Dyson emphasised the crucial role played by the teacher, who allowed ample space for students to evaluate the script and the performance of their peers. The teacher's actions suggest that, in order for students to use artefacts to avoid negative social positioning, educators must engage in critical literacy pedagogy (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Muspratt *et al.*, 1997; Shor, 1999).

However, the dialectical interaction of literacies, artefacts, and identities is not always as positive as is suggested by my example or by Dyson's study. A recent, detailed, multi-year study of 'gangsta literacy' among alienated youth prohibits such a hopeful reading (Moje, 2000). In her study, Elizabeth Moje showed how youth used distinctive literacy practices and cultural artefacts such as tagging and graffiti, but also poetry, journal, and letter writing to signify their gang membership. However, given the significant discrimination and stereotyping directed at 'gangsta' youth by teachers, city leaders, and law enforcement officials, Moje questioned whether such literacy practices would help students to avoid negative positioning. Moje concluded that the literacies and identities of the youth were both transformative and tragic:

The practices of these youth are transformative in the sense that they provide a means for the youth 'to be a part of the story' and to gain and maintain powerful positions within that story . . . [However,] [i]t is in the potential for further marginalisation that gang [literacy] practices become tragic. Common representations of marginalised youth illustrate that the practices, although powerful to the youths themselves, also serve to reinforce and reproduce negative, stereotypical, and misleading images of young people, images that support their continued marginalisation. Moreover, many of the practices in which these adolescents engaged, as meaningful as they were in their lives, were physically dangerous to them and to others. Thus although the literacy practices of 'gangsta' adolescents provide a site for the generation of a cultural theory of literacy, one that acknowledges the transformative power of people's everyday literacy practices, these findings also raise difficult questions about how these students are labelled and further marginalised by their uses of gang literacy. (Moje, 2000: 681–2)

Moje concluded that, to avoid (further) marginalisation of the youth, educators should teach them 'how the language and literacy practices they value might be used productively in other contexts to challenge dominant assumptions about literacy and social practice' (Moje, 2000: 684). In short, like Dyson, Moje suggested that schooling could contribute to positive social change by incorporating (without coopting) compelling cultural artefacts while developing, with students, the kind of social analysis central to critical literacy.

Conclusions and Implications

The critical framework proposed here helpfully reminds us, as literacy researchers, to attend not only to the positional elements of identity, or what Gee

called being ‘recognized as a “certain kind of person.”’ In addition, we must pay attention to the symbolic or figured elements of identity, and the ways in which people use cultural artefacts to contest or maintain positional identities.

Ultimately, in discussing the relationship between literacies, identities, and social change, most of us rely, rather hopefully, on the belief that critical literacy pedagogy will promote the sort of social awareness and critique necessary to challenge social inequities. However, we should extend the theory of literacy and identity proposed here to the critical literacy classroom. Critical literacy classrooms must endeavour to incorporate, provide access to, or invent cultural artefacts that resonate with students. The emphasis in critical literacy on negotiating the curriculum with students and grounding inquiry in student experiences provides one avenue for the inclusion of such artefacts. However, critical literacy classrooms are also well known for a particular discourse that criticises capitalist relations and promotes empowerment – a discourse that may have little cultural resonance with students. Without careful attention to students’ reactions to cultural artefacts, we cannot hope to stimulate the sort of critical identity work necessary to the authoring of new selves, new figured worlds, and new social relations.

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Correspondence

Any correspondence should be directed to Professor Lesley Bartlett, Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W 120th Street, Box 55, New York, NY 10027, USA (LB2035@columbia.edu).

Notes

1. By Discourses, Gee references the joining of language (writing, speaking, reading) to ‘ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes’ (Gee, 1996: 127). With the term, he wishes to reference the cultural meanings attached to language in use. Like many other sociocultural scholars of language and literacy, I consider this union of language and meaning to be encompassed within the term ‘literacies’. I maintain ‘Discourses’ in this passage in order to be faithful to Gee’s text. Gee’s work on Discourse acquisition relies on the concept of cultural models, as developed by (D’Andrade, 1995; Holland & Quinn, 1987; Strauss & Quinn, 1997) and other cultural anthropologists. In the following section, I argue that the notions of figured worlds and cultural artefacts improve upon that earlier concept by emphasising the ongoing cultural production of meanings and social structures.
2. The data were collected during a two year, multi-sited ethnographic investigation of Brazilian adult literacy programmes; for more information, see Bartlett, 2001b.

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