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Academic Language in the English Classroom
Community of Practice: A Question of Identity and Access

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The impetus for this paper arises primarily from personal experience and a developing awareness concerning my own membership in a community of practice—English education—and the processes I went through in developing my identity as a participant. Within any given field, there exists a corpus of specialized knowledge, and by extension, specialized language which its participants must learn and be able to use in order to gain full membership in the group—to become “full participants” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29). But how can development of this new language be supported, and how does mastery (or lack thereof) of the specialized language control learners’ access to and participation in these communities? More specifically, and situated within the field of English education, how does students’ appropriation of the specialized language used in discussing and interacting with texts shape their identities as learners and engaged members in the English classroom community of practice?

In an attempt to frame future research which would address these questions, I will be adopting a situated cognition lens and examining the potential insights that Lave and Wenger’s (1991) community of practice theory as well as the field of linguistics can provide when examining students’ appropriation of the specialized language necessary for talking about literature in an English classroom (both secondary and in preparation for post-secondary). From the literature side, I will also be recalling Bakhtin’s (1981) theory of discourse and Louise Rosenblatt’s (1995) reader-response theory to provide more insight into the construction of students’ identities as participants as they engage in academic textual discussions. Finally, I will be recalling Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of cultural capital in looking at how these language and dialogic engagement issues are affected by students’ varying degrees of access to this academically valued community of practice.

A community of practice: The English classroom

There has been much discussion in the last 15 years or so surrounding the concept of communities of practice (Barab & Duffy, 2000; Greeno, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991) within the field of educational psychology, and the various apprenticeships and entering modes which learners undergo in order to gain access to and membership in specific communities (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). The trajectories of these participatory modes are exhaustively defined (Driscoll, 2005), and the theory's more general applicability to school-age learners is well-documented (both in- and outside of school) (Barab & Duffy, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger (1991) define these communities as "a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (p. 98); a rather ambiguous construction, but one which allows for the vagaries and emergent conditions of actual practices. In order to become a legitimate member of a community of practice, one must have access to the socio-cultural practices of the group, as "[becoming] a full participant ... includes engaging with the technologies of everyday practice, as well as participating in the social relations, production processes, and other activities of communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 101). Within this discussion, the community of practice shall consist of the English language arts classroom, with a particular focus on the literary discussions that typically arise within the community.

The individual within the community

This paper, while using a community of practice framework, is more specifically interested in the individual's role and development within the community. The individual's "participation in social practice—subjective as well as objective—suggests a very explicit focus

on the person, but as person-in-the-world, as member of a sociocultural community” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 52). The development of the individual is thus inextricably tied to the co-development of the individual as participant in the community. Barab and Duffy (2000) also emphasized this parallel nature of individual and community participant identity when they restated the importance of the “development of the self, and the importance of legitimate participation as part of a community in the development of that self” (p. 35). Within the community we shall be examining—the English language arts classroom—the individual will be defined as a learner in the academic sense, and a participant in the critical dialogic exchanges that arise in response to literature. As regards the issue of identity, I shall be using Greeno’s (1998) definition, which is based on Wenger’s¹ ideas: “Regularities of an individual’s activities, in a trajectory that spans participation at different times in a community and participation in different communities, are characterized as the individual’s *identity*” (p. 6). Thus, it is clear that participation in a community contributes to the formation of identity, though further research is needed to determine how exactly language and participation within an academic community contribute to the development of a learner’s identity. Nevertheless, this situated framework provides a useful foundation for examining issues related to participation, identity, and access, as it “emphasizes ways that social practices are organized to encourage and support engaged participation by members of communities and that are understood by individuals to support the continuing development of their personal identities” (Greeno, 1998, p. 11). Having thus defined the guiding framework of this paper, I shall now move into a discussion of the actual practices of the English language arts community.

Specialized language in the English classroom

Literary and critical theory (and the academic language these fields employ) present important frameworks within which to examine literary texts and are increasingly being incorporated into the high school English curriculum through instructional practices that adopt different critical lenses in examining literature (Appleman, 2000). These academic registers that are often required for participation in class discussions “are not arbitrary prescriptions or rigid conventions; rather, they evolved to serve the needs of specific disciplines in response to newly emerging sociocultural contexts. [They] are discourses of power for functional, not merely status, reasons” (Fang, Schleppegrell, & Cox, 2006, p. 251). Nevertheless, students’ initial reactions to this type of academic language may be less than positive, especially if they have had no previous exposure. Their engagement with the language is important though, as Barab and Duffy (2000) note,

Through participation in a practice field or even as a peripheral participant to a community of practice, rules and behavior expectations may feel arbitrary, artificial, and even unnecessary. However, through participation in the community over time, an individual comes to accept the historical context and the importance of socially negotiated norms for defining community and his or her own identity. It is only through extended participation in a community that this history and, hence, a sense of self, can develop. (p. 38)

This understanding and appropriation of academic language is crucial if students are to progress as members of the English language arts community, but, as will be explored later, even provided the same amount of exposure to academic language, some students are in a position to more readily acquire this language than others. “Knowledge of and competence in academic registers enable students to gain access to important realms of educational knowledge and to participate fully” (Fang et al., 2006, p. 251), and so, research concerning the ways in which this language develops would provide a foundation for more effective and supportive instructional practices. If “learning to become a legitimate participant in a community involves learning how

to talk (and be silent) in the manner of full participants” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 105), then instructional practices that support such development would appear to be an important classroom feature.

Development of specialized language

Although he is often referenced in discussions of language development (along with Piaget), psychologist Lev Vygotsky wrote very little about language development beyond early childhood. It would seem that his only theories that are applicable to later language development consist of the more general learning theory of the zone of proximal development and his theory of language as a mediating and intrapersonal problem-solving tool (Vygotsky, 1978). There exists an abundant corpus of research on *second* language learning and teaching (Stern, 1983), adult literacy (see Kutner et al., 2007 for a review), and emerging language development in children, but little if any research on how older, school-age learners (who already have a general mastery of their first language) acquire new, specialized language. There is also abundant research on vocabulary development as it relates to reading, but again, nothing on the development of the specialized language used in critical discussions of literature. And, as Zwiers (2007) notes, appropriation and use of academic language requires “in-depth understanding of concepts” (p. 94), not just vocabulary, in order for students to be able to use the language in constructing and reacting to complex ideas. Because of the existence of this research gap, it is outside of the scope of this paper to examine in any depth the developmental processes involved in the appropriation of specialized language in secondary school students. However, an existing theoretical construction that could be useful in future research, is the concept of language as a

mediating sign system or tool as outlined by Vygotsky (1978) and Wertsch (1991), since appropriation of this mediation is essential for participation in this community of practice.

Academic language: Definition and use

The specific features of classroom language have been well researched by the field of linguistics (Fang et al., 2006; Schleppegrell, 2004; Zwiers, 2007). Researchers have found that the “oral language of schooling differs from the language of ordinary conversation in important ways, tending increasingly toward monologue, intralinguistic references, and more formal and precise wording as students learn to present and share the knowledge they are developing (Fang et al., 2006, p. 249; see Zwiers, 2007 for a definition of academic language). Because classroom language is specialized in the sense of being different from everyday speech (and the theoretical language used in critical discussions of literature arguably even *more* specialized), a thorough understanding and appropriation by members of the community is essential if students are to participate with their more well-acquainted peers. As Fang et al. (2006) assert, “Students who are more familiar with the schooled ways with words tend to have greater awareness of the different language choices that are effective for participating in different situational contexts of schooling” (p. 249). But this engagement requires more than just passive observation and linguistic absorption: “For newcomers then the purpose is not to learn *from* talk as a substitute for legitimate peripheral participation; it is to learn *to* talk as a key to legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 109). Learners’ existing (actual) linguistic development limits their participation, and the amount of their participation limits their linguistic development. It is in this way that “Issues about language ... may well have more to do with legitimacy of participation and with access to peripherality than they do with knowledge

transmission” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 105). If learners are unable to attain this academic language, they are unable to participate as legitimate members of the English language arts community and to interact with the members of the community as they engage in the practice of academic discussions of literature.

Academic language in dialogues about literature

Greeno (1998) defines the “Regular patterns of activity in a community, in which individuals participate” as the *practices* of a community (p. 6). Within an English language arts community, one of the regular practices involves engaging in discussions surrounding literature. Two theorists who are particularly useful in looking at literature exchanges, are Mikhail Bakhtin and Louise Rosenblatt. Both outline theories that involve the interaction of the reader with the text, and the ways in which these transactions produce mutual effects which extend into the interpersonal realm. Bakhtin’s (1981) theory is admittedly dense, but as pertains to the social interaction of language involved in the literature discussion, his thoughts are especially poignant:

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. (p. 276)

In other words, the particular utterances (or instances of language use) by individual students necessarily have an effect on the community in which this discussion is occurring, and conversely, the collective utterances of the other members of the community have an effect on the linguistic participation of the individual. Similarly, in looking at the individual’s interaction (or in Rosenblatt’s terms, *transaction*) with the text, Rosenblatt (1995) notes that the learner “can begin to achieve a sound approach to literature only when he reflects on his response to it, when

he attempts to understand what in the work and in himself produced that reaction, and when he thoughtfully goes on to modify, reject, or accept it” (p. 72). This critical reflection often occurs within and is supported by the practice of whole-class or small group literature discussions and the interpersonal exchanges that result. Referencing the ideas of Bakhtin, Beals (1998) notes, “Both the individual and the world around him or her are dynamic participants in the processes of development ... we *appropriate* words and meanings from what we have heard from others.... We actively take from this world, and ... we push back on the world” (p. 13). And so, the ability of a learner to participate in this community practice is critical to their development, both academically, and personally. However, as Clarke (2006) notes in her article on gender power relations within literature discussion groups, power is indeed enacted in significant ways in the English language arts classroom, and this in turn influences the ability of certain students to access the dialogic exchange, and by extension, the identity of the individual within the community.

Issues of access: Language as cultural capital

James Paul Gee, a linguist charged with the task of defining the term *literacy* in his article “What is Literacy?” (2001), outlines a distinction (similar to applied linguist Stephen Krashen’s definitions [Stern, 1983]) between the terms “acquisition” and “learning” (p. 3). “Acquisition,” Gee asserts, is a process of acquiring, in natural settings, “subconsciously by exposure to models and a process of trial and error,” the primary discourse of the home (and in some cases, the wider community) (p. 3). “Learning” then, involves “conscious knowledge gained through teaching” that “inherently involves attaining ... some degree of meta-knowledge about the matter” (p. 3). This distinction is important, because if the primary discourse one

acquires in the home is very similar to the secondary discourses that are valued in other settings (for example, the English classroom), it is more likely that one will encounter opportunities for reinforcement and eventual acquisition of meta-knowledge about this discourse:

Children from non-mainstream homes often do not get the opportunities to acquire dominant secondary discourses [i.e. academic language valued in school] ... due to the lack of access their parents have to these secondary discourses. Thus, when coming to school they cannot practice what they haven't yet got and they are exposed mostly to a process of learning and not acquisition. (Gee, 2001, p. 7)

In this way, linguistic capital in the academic setting relies not only on factors controlled by those with a mastery of the dominant discourse, but by factors which are beyond a child's control. As Bourdieu (1977), the original commentator on "cultural capital" noted: "the academic market value of each individual's linguistic capital is a function of the distance between the type of symbolic mastery demanded by the School and the practical mastery he owes to his initial class upbringing" (p. 116). And when the classroom fails to address this disparity in existing linguistic familiarity with academic language, these differences can easily fossilize, potentially excluding certain learners from the community.

Bourdieu, in his research on schools in France and Algeria, outlined a theory of cultural capital as it is constructed in education systems (Robbins, 1991). He proposed the idea of "the school system conceived as an institution for the reproduction of legitimate culture," and the different social classes as "characterized ... by unequal distances from academic culture and different dispositions to recognize and acquire it" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 101). Like Gee (2001), Bourdieu recognizes the two-part system of marginalization, in which children first acquire a discourse and culture that is less-valued, and then engage in classroom activities which further separate them from the more valued discourses and the opportunities of the middle- and

upper-class users of these discourses. As Gee stated, “the non-mainstream child will always have more conflicts in using and thus mastering dominant secondary discourses, since they conflict more seriously with his primary discourse and community-based secondary ones” (p. 8), and the English classroom, when it fails to address issues of access to this more highly-valued secondary discourse, is complicit in the marginalization it procures.

Conclusion and questions

Participation in the discussions characteristic of an English language arts classroom presents an elucidatory example of the ways in which language, identity, and access converge in an academic community of practice. Particularly problematic in this setting, is the issue that Zwiers (2007) draws attention to, that “schools require from learners the academic discourse skills and knowledge that teachers do not explicitly teach” (p. 97). Consequently, students who arrive in the English language arts classroom with little mastery of the academic language required for participation, will undoubtedly find themselves on the outskirts of the communities’ practices, and with an impoverished sense of identity within the community. Questions that remain for future research would address the manner in which learners’ development and appropriation of the specialized language needed for participation in the English classroom shapes their identities as learners and legitimate participants, how their degree of access contributes to this, and how teachers could support the development of this specialized language in order to promote inclusion in the learning community. Answers to these questions are essential for ensuring not only a supportive learning environment, but also the opportunity for participation from frequently marginalized student populations.

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¹ I was unable to attain a copy of Wenger's article, which was "in press" at the time Greeno's (1998) article was published.