

The Unnoticed Literary Structures That Affect Education

When I think about my first day of school, in kindergarten, I think about the nametag that was hung around my neck. A nametag that had my emergency contact information on it, in case I got lost in the crowd, looking back it reminds me of tagged cattle. I would go to the bus stop with my brother and show my nametag in order to gain access to a ride to school. The bus driver would quiz me on the information on my nametag though I was still unable to read. Once at school I would be taken down the hallways by a woman with a little sign and then to my class with hundreds of little signs, none of which I could read yet. There were even numbers on the carpet to show me how to sit in a circle. Every part of how to function and behave as a student was scaffolded for me by signs and posters. By the time I hit middle school it was second nature and I had no excuses for acting out. Signs, words, and pictures were really rules and laws that modeled the behavior my schools expected me to exhibit and affected how I looked at literacies in school and my success within the system of these structured literacies.

Now that I am aware that school signs, labels and posters were the subliminal force behind schools behavior modeling I have to ask, how do they do it? The first step in understanding how it is done is in understanding what these signs are. Sylvia Scribner would probably tell you that they fall into the three metaphors of literacy, "Literacy as adaptation, as power, and as a state of grace (Lindquist, Seitz 9)." But how many of us actually consider deciphering a sign part of literacy? As Lindquist and Seitz would tell you, "literacy is an abstract noun with no corresponding verb to tell us what range of actions might possibly be associated with it (7)." So if we have free reign to assign whatever range of actions to literacy that we see fit it would make sense to associate the writing, reading, and decoding of signs as literacy. Therefore, if we consider school signs literacy,

based on Scribner's loose definition of literacy, what type of metaphor are these school literacies and what does that metaphor tell us about how students interact with them? By looking at a short collection of signs that a student would encounter on any given day in high school we will answer these questions together and try to understand how behavioral based literacies frame success and failure in the modern educational system. When we consider Lindquist and Seitz definition of power dynamics in literacy, "The social forces between participants in a literacy event that are determined by social, economic, or cultural power (70)," and use it to examine the literacy of a school bus sign (figure 1.1) a few ideas jump out. There are five key elements to understanding this dynamic: text, context, function, participants, and motivation. Here, the most important elements to understanding this behavioral literacy's power dynamics are function and participants. The function of this bus sign is primarily to promote safety but also to keep order and protect the bus driver. Since there are no seatbelts on school buses and bus drivers are usually



Figure 1.1 sign on the front of the Cata buses at Michigan State University, 2008.

the only mature adult, they become responsible for full buses of wild teens while also trying to drive. And since the only participants of this sign are the students, because they are the only passengers; they are the ones targeted for behavioral change. This creates a very specific

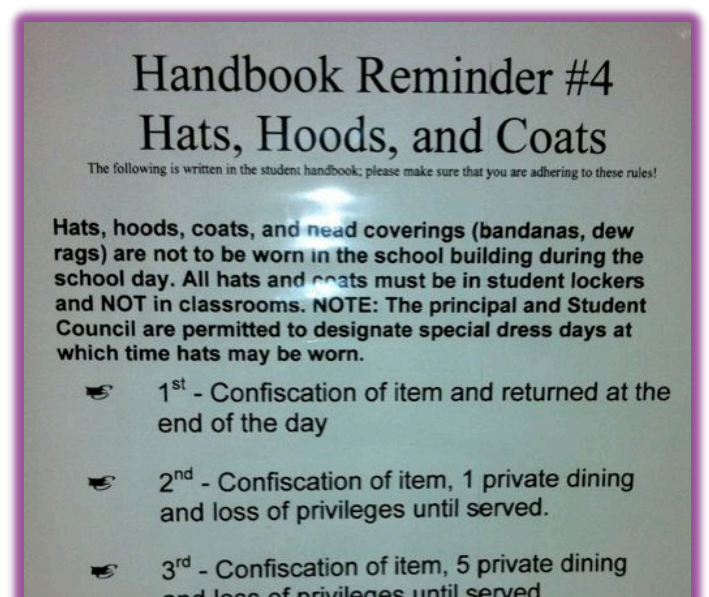
dynamic for the participants of this literacy; alliance, conformity and rebellion. The students will bond

together in an, 'us vs. them' mentality and then, either conform to the rules or rebel but either reaction will be linked to the sign and to each other. Thinking back on Scribner's metaphors, literacy as power in particular, we can see a connection between the students created literacy

dynamic and literacy as power. The greater cultural forces of school, punishment, and government legitimacy have made students unconsciously aware that the power is not in their hands but what is power? According to Dr. Heffner, schools hold a type of legitimate power, one of the five categories of power developed by social psychologists (AllPhyc online, psychology 101 chapter 8 social psychology, section 3). Legitimate power means that the schools power comes from the authority the government grants it and the rules by which it is run. Whatever type of power a person, or organization, holds over another person, psychologists say that, “We tend to change our belief about a topic before we would change our behavior. To equate this with influencing others, we see that if we can change the way a person behaves, we can change the way they think or feel.” (Heffner, AllPhyc online, psychology 101 chapter 8 social psychology, section 3) So how do these theories and power dynamics affect the students on the bus and their education? If schools post signs, not just to change a student’s temporary behavior while in school but also to alter their beliefs about behavior then schools are serving as a factory for submissive citizenship. So, on the bus the first sign of the day serves as a reminder to students that their behavior is being watched and their beliefs monitored.

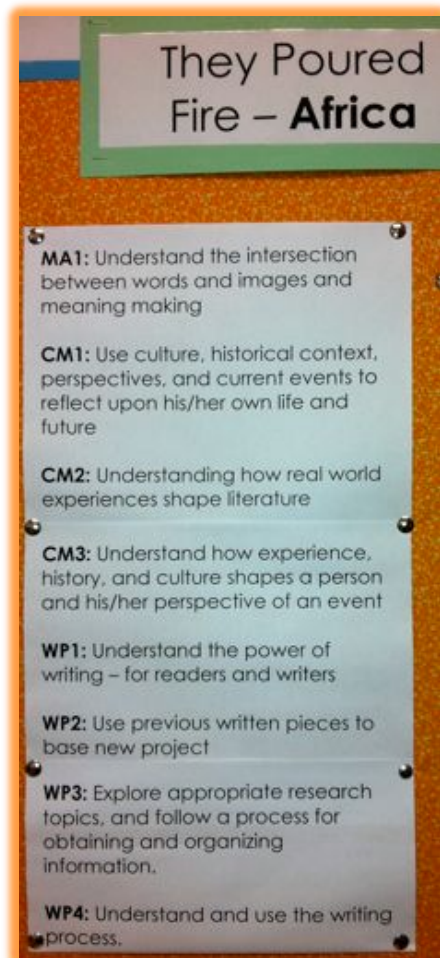
Now the students are at school, their power within the structure of academic literacy is already reduced from their bus ride. They start to walk to class and come across a hall sign (figure 1.2) telling them that they can’t wear their hats, coats or hoodies in school buildings. If we examine this ‘reminder’ from the perspective of Lindquist and Seitz five elements of the power dynamics of literacy we can better understand how students relate to this text and each other (70). For this ‘reminder’ the most important elements to examine are: the text and motivation. The text itself is a rule though it is called a reminder because it is quoting the

Figure 1.2 photo taken at my placement in a local East Lansing high school, 2011.



student handbook so students are meant to already be aware of this rule. It is one of ten other 'reminders' about the student handbook plastered up across the hallways of the school. Though it is written formally and forcefully, with negative language and capitals, it also says that the student council and principal are on an equal par because they both can chose 'special dress days'. It would seem, that though behavioral change is still a top priority for school literacy it is not being done within the school by taking power away from the student. As for how students relate to these posters, I would say over half of the male population of the school wears baseball caps and hoodies at the same time on any given day and I have yet to see a teacher ask them to change. I believe the motivation to follow these rules is very weak as this literacy is more like wallpaper than 'reminders'. Essentially the students are given the power to pick days on which these rules do not apply and that power is undermined by the faculty's lack of enforcement of the rules on 'regulardress days' once again shifting the power dynamics of literacy.

As the students make their way into the classroom they have now had conflicting images of



the structure of literacy in schools. The bus telling them they had no power encouraging them to rebel against the system, and the hallways telling them the system wouldn't stop their rebellion. The classroom is hard to analyze, as it will always be structured differently based on the teacher running the room so here are a few images that represent some classroom illiteracies: figure 1.3 and 1.4. In the first classroom the teacher has decided to display the ELA standards (figure 1.3) and how they relate to the novel the students are reading so they can better understand the purpose behind reading the text. When we examine my mentor teacher's bulletin board we see that the standards have not been re- worded to match the unit or made more understandable to the students. In my

Figure 1.3 taken at placement 2011 a picture of ELA standards

TE 407 class we did an activity where we had to translate the standards into one short, clear sentence that would be easily explainable to a parent. This activity took my group (of future teachers) the whole two hours to get through the first five standards for tenth grade English; I find it hard to believe that 12th graders would not struggle with relating the standards to their own work by themselves. Additionally, these standards are never directly addressed in my mentor's class but are meant to be self reviewed and self checked for achievement. I asked a couple of students how they felt about this policy and they did not give positive feedback, claiming that it was hard to get a high grade and that they felt their effort and work ethic was not taken into consideration enough. If we look at the conversation box (figure 1.4) we can examine a conversation a student had with a teacher over the standards in her classroom. Here the mentor backs up the unspoken power struggles in school literacies by not explaining the standards or offering helpful prompting questions so that the student might reach the right conclusion. This becomes almost ridiculous when the teacher responds to the students worries with sarcastic retorts. The students in this school are on a block schedule, with trimesters, which means for most of them they have not had

English instruction in over a year. To expect students, that are severely behind in basic instruction to be at the mental level of their grade with no extra work (perhaps less) simply does not work. This literacy (figure 1.3) takes the responsibility off the teacher for teaching and makes it harder on the students to succeed. Going back to our connection between power and literacy this literature makes it easy for the teacher to maintain power through confusion of the student while appearing well intentioned. As Heffner would tell you, "The target or listener plays a role in how he will be influenced as well. Those with low self-esteem and/or high self-doubt tend to be more influenced than others. The more we doubt our own ability, the

Classroom Observations

Teacher: "I don't know why they're going to Church is a similarity? You could say that their religion is."

Student: "Well then Church is a similarity"

Teacher: "A weak one"

Student: "Well then my whole paper is weak!"

Teacher: "You are in 12th grade, you guys should know this by now"

Student: "this is a lot! (referring to the standards with hand motions)"

Teacher: "Because your essay is going to be perfect!"

Figure 1.4, observations from my in a high school English placement, 2011

more we look to others for guidance or input.” (AllPhyisc online, psychology 101 chapter 8 social psychology, section 3) Therefore it is reasonable to assume, that if the students self-esteem is lowered by inability to understand or properly complete the task then they become an easier target for the behavioral modification literacies of this text. The text instructs the students behavior, by telling them to become more independent thinkers and to use their skills of critical analysis to survive, traits that can be easily found within the school standards. But what about the student, who has become impressionable, doesn't understand the text seeks help and is turned away, then tries to work independently and simply cannot understand alone. We preach independence in schools but value team work in the workplace, what are we really preparing them for?

Again, when the students ask my mentor about the standards the next day they are given a similar treatment. She starts class by saying:

“You all need to look at the rubric for the standards! You guys keep asking if you have to do something but it's very clearly explained in the standards. I copy and pasted them to relate. It is not difficult!” –Mentor at Charlotte HS, 2011.

When she announces this to the students it is at the beginning of a class that will be primarily taking place in the computer lab. So, rather than listening, the students are busy gathering their book bags, ruffling their coats, and perching on the edge of their seats. This quote is also interesting because it explores the mentor's impression of the accessibility of her standards. She believes that the standards are *so* easy to understand that she need not rephrase them; in fact she directly copies them. This would be acceptable if she was able to properly explain connections when students ask for clarification, but she has often exclaimed, “I don't remember what standard it is but it's one of them.” The atmosphere of this class can be directly linked to her lack of follow through and inability to explain the literary references her unit's are structured around. This atmosphere leads students back to the belief that the growth of their critical analysis skills is not a priority. By giving out confusing and multilayered standards the teacher implies that the goals of learning are checking all the boxes not comprehension. This is a great example of how changing a students behavior can change their beliefs (Heffner, AllPhyisc online, psychology

101 chapter 8 social psychology, section 3). When students complete work in this class they are now trained to look for the standards rather than critical thinking, comprehension, and exploration of ideas. This becomes clear when looking at papers from this class, their spelling and grammar is below state standards but the all the standards on their rubric are accomplished. Sometimes their papers even sounded like they were answering each standard as a question rather than developing their paper from idea to idea. Their belief is now that good writing is covering all the bases not introducing stirring questions, breaking free of the five paragraph form, proving their conclusions or excellent grammar and spelling.

Ultimately students lose their freedom and hand over their power as they move through the literacies of schooling, whether or not they are properly enforced, but what does this do to students ability to learn? As a recently graduated high schooler in 2008, I saw my peers learn to work around the system and complain about the lack of voice that they were given in school. Expression was squashed by clothing rules and relationships became public business, as teachers got involved with anything from hand holding to kissing. I even had teachers tell me that my boyfriend and I holding hands in the hallway made them uncomfortable. Can an adult walk up to a teenage couple on the street and tell them that their handholding makes them uncomfortable and not be considered rude? Or tell them that they cannot wear jeans that are pre-ripped? What makes this okay in schools? Schools are a government facility and so are given that legitimate power that allows them to create rules but why not create rules that results in a community where all students are equal, comfortable and expressive, free and empowered to learn. What is the harm in handholding? Most jeans come pre-ripped these days and having rules that focus on the negative or are hard to understand is going to foster a learning environment that makes students feel like they are a problem not the reason schools exist. As teachers we want to motivate students to learn through the structure of school, make it welcoming for their participation and make sure the function is for the students not for the faculty. Eventually, if schools continue to aim their posters at behavioral change and foster the growth of submissive citizens we will have a world of rule following drones that are unable to see the bigger picture or create change. If we re-

examine the five elements of power dynamics in literacy every time we create any kind of literacy in a school we can accomplish a school environment that promotes the type of learning we are aiming for. Perhaps then kindergarten children will not feel like cattle being pushed through the gates and high school students will not feel so powerless to express themselves.

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