Privilege, Privation, and the Ethnography of Literacy

The concept of “intelligence” was powerfully debunked by Gould (1981) in *The Mismeasure of Man*. He argued that intelligence was a complex range of illusive characteristics and skills, falsely reified by science and reduced (through arbitrary, unscientific, and prejudicial processes) to a single number, the Intelligence Quotient (IQ). Gould chillingly described how IQ scores ascribed inaccurate labels, which were used as the basis for assigning status and stigma consistent with existing race, class, and gender hierarchies in society. Gould recalled Socrates’ earlier attempt to create a logical and convincing explanation for assigning stable stratified social ranks. Socrates asserted that God framed the citizens differently; some composed of gold, some of silver, and some of brass. Based on these constitutions, differential statuses could be conferred. Further, Socrates maintained that people who might be unconvinced initially would come, over generations, to unquestioningly believe and blindly accept their undeserved fate.

**The Mismeasure of Literacy**

When considering the question of what matters in literacy, striking parallels with Gould’s work came to mind. The concept of “literacy,” especially intensified by the current conservative political climate, has similarly been falsely reified as a clearly distinct “thing” that we can teach and test in simple and standardized ways. Literacy is reduced to numerical reading scores, percentiles, and grade levels, which are used to sort, privilege, and deprive students. Literacy assessments, like the IQ scores examined by Gould, though pitifully inadequate and culturally biased, provide the data for the Foucauldian dividing practices that dominate our education system. Literacy has become a site for playing out the unjust social arrangements of hierarchy and inequity in our educational institutions where minoritized and marginalized “others” predictably fail. And sadly, as in Socrates’ fabricated myth, individuals and their families frequently accept their institutionally ascribed and often fallacious status with little question.

I come to the study of literacy from an anthropological and sociolinguistic perspective, a perspective that I believe helps unravel and debunk prevailing literacy myths and misuses. Ethnographic studies of literacy conducted over the past two decades dramatically demonstrate that what we might loosely identify as literacy involves a complex and widely ranging set of discursive (oral and written), cognitive, social, and relational practices, behaviors, and understandings (e.g., Schieffelin & Gilmore, 1986). These studies examine literacy-related communicative competencies (Hymes, 1972) along an oral/written continuum, documenting students’ rich language and literacy abilities and performances. They also powerfully detail the sociocultural aspects of literacy that manifest ongoing relations of domination, resistance, and internalized stigma in our society.

**Literacy Competencies and Literacy Identities**

As human beings, we have been defined by our unique language capacity. Language and communication are irrepressible and basic to our very nature. Ethnographic studies document language competencies often unrecognized in conventional assessments. At the University of Pennsylvania in the early eighties, with Dell Hymes and my late husband, David Smith, we conducted one of the first federally funded ethnographic literacy studies. Our research focused on urban communities where the majority of children were African American and failing in school.

“They can’t read.” “They can’t write.” These were common descriptions offered by the schools. Test scores
seemed to confirm the evaluation. In striking contrast, our observations in a range of social contexts, in and out of school, demonstrated that students had literacy competencies unnoticed and unappreciated in school. I identified these competencies as “sub-rosa literacy” and described detailed performances of these abilities (including a variety of decoding and comprehension skills) noted by teachers as deficient in the same students (Gilmore, 1986).

“They can’t read. They can’t write.” We heard the chorus again in 1985—this time across the continent in rural Alaska, where the stigmatized target was the indigenous student population, including elementary school through university students. Again our ethnographic research demonstrated student competencies where others had irresponsibly and falsely identified deficiencies and failure. In our research, we detailed the richly peopled counterstories that contested the social injustices embedded in hierarchy and the inequity in the institutions responsible for a literacy gatekeeping enterprise (Gilmore and Smith, 2002).

Unlike Socrates, who openly and consciously conspired to deprive and privilege, the teachers and tests responsible for all too frequently identified self-labeling may have very little to do with the ability to encode or decode text and even less with the amount of literacy-related activity one engages in” (pp 59–60). In our West Philadelphia research, for example, we found that many intermediate grade boys said they “couldn’t read” and “didn’t read” and declared themselves “non-readers.” Yet observations demonstrated that they read frequently and competently (Smith, 1987).

This internalized stigma and self-labeling is widespread. Patricia Griesel (2002) documents the case of a woman who came to the University of Arizona seeking help because she “couldn’t read.” A series of individually administered tests indicated that she could read quite well. She did not have a reading problem. She did have an internalized and stigmatized identity problem. Smith (1987) suggests that many of the adults who participate in adult literacy programs and see themselves as illiterate may actually come to literacy programs seeking redemption rather than remediation.

PRIVATION AND PRIVILEGE: CHALLENGING THE BOUNDARIES

Privation can be defined as a lack of what is needed for existence. Indeed, whether it is the skills of decoding and encoding text, the socialization into discourses of the dominant culture, or the entitlement to identify oneself as competent in language and literacy, all students must be allowed access to literacy. Without that access, they will not have what is needed for existence in our society. Literacy cannot be available to only a privileged group. It cannot be reserved as a peculiar favor to advantaged populations. Our professional responsibility demands that we see beyond the limiting and arbitrary boundaries of how we have defined the world of reading and writing.

By examining literacy within its socio-cultural context, we are in a much stronger position to understand the dynamics of its nature, acquisition, and development. Our challenge is to identify existing literacy competencies and to facilitate strong literacy identities, thus creating educational spaces that defy the hegemonic society around us. This endeavor will strongly benefit from the continuing contributions of studies in the ethnography of literacy.

References


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