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Literacy in InterAction:

Literacy Practices and Self-Efficacy Across Spaces

Introduction

 The idea of literacy has varied meanings based on social, cultural, and structural (power) context. Despite these factors, western society has often perceived literacy and its relationship to thought in a limited perspective. Cushman et al. asserts that American and Western European traditional nineteenth century research considered literacy and thought to be “more focused on the particular cognitive processes that occur when one reads and writes” (6) in formal schooling. In western culture, literacy was emphasized as both necessary and valuable for economic and social advancement. Literacy contributed to the work force, morality, and wealth of the American society (211)**.** However, since this time**,** definitions of literacy have evolved slightly. Scholars like Brice Heath have shown the value in variation of the definition in her study of how communities in North Carolina have benefited from connecting culture and orality with literacy (10). Through her study, she provides examples of ways that students successfully navigated through their societies.

Still, some traditional approaches—such as those in favor of the autonomous model—view literacy separate from social involvement. This is the perspective that remains prevalent in society, as national testing statistics measure participants’ performance level as the determinant for literacy level. Such is the perspective of Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIACC).PIAAC provides annual statistics of adult performance based on its definition of literacy. It defines literacy as "understanding, evaluating, using, and engaging with written text to participate in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (NCES). The discussion about what literacy is remains ongoing, however. One thing is for certain—there is not one definition of literacy that suffices all. As it varies for academics, so is the case for nonacademics.

For this project, I use Street’s definition of literacy, which he describes as “social practices and conceptions of reading and writing” (Cushman et al. 430). As I reflect on my own experiences, I realize that my processing of skills was not exclusive of my performance. Whether completing group or individual work, I formed meaning in relating reading and writing to activities. During my K-12 education, I engaged in a process of reading aloud to sound out certain words. Now, as a PhD student, I also prefer a low-noise environment or soft music, as I believe both are most productive for me in successfully completing tasks. At the same time, I have benefited from the perspectives of others through peer review, informal critique, and questioning. Similarly, I believe that other students can reflect on how their experiences were impacted by their processes or the interactions in their environments. Most importantly, Street, as does Sribner and Cole, view literacy in multiple ways, considering that not all texts are written and that the evaluation alone does not create meaning.

For this project, I focus on an environment where the definition of literacy has been fluid. For academic spaces, literacy can be geared toward fulfilling academic standards. However, one academic environment has challenged the limited notions of literacy and has supported the literacy practices of its students in their personal growth and academic learning. According to Street’s definition, a literacy practice is described as “a higher level of abstraction and referring to both behavior and conceptualisations related to the use of reading/or writing” (Cushman, et al. 438).This Branching off of Scribner and Cole’s definitions focused on social practices used to develop knowledge (Lankshear and Knobel 35), Street’s definition captures the challenge in narrowing down what literacy; there may be unseen activities that are part of an individual’s understanding a text. More importantly, these behaviors vary by individual, environment, and culture. In this paper, my goals are to identify literacy practices of a specific youth population in an academic setting, connect the literacy practices to self-efficacy, and raise questions about how these literacy practices can serve as a heuristic for an adult population in nonacademic settings.

My inspiration for the project comes from my experience as a volunteer at Third Street Education Center in Greenville, North Carolina. This educational center houses three branches: an academy, business, and community outreach. There, I support literacy learning in the afterschool program/extended learning of Third Street Academy. I learned about this organization through a colleague who previously worked with an organization for a proposal and grant writing course. Once I enrolled in the course, he shared his experience with me and put me in contact with the director. Not only was I able to work with the organization for my project, but I began volunteering over the summer and continued through this semester. I have spent three and half months as a volunteer. In that time, I have had an opportunity to observe a few literacy practices employed by the students. Most of the afterschool program’s activities regarding learning involve some social aspect. During the afterschool program, students learn about parts of speech, are assigned a type of book based on weekly reading category (life science, chemistry, etc.) and reading level, write book reports and give presentations on the content, and collectively complete recalling exercises (mapping and questioning). Students have individual notebooks that are pre-labeled by weeks. Each week, students focus on a different book with a similar assignment of essay writing or book report. Oral and written literacies are a part of the curriculum.

History

Third Street Education Center is a 501(c) (3) Christian-based nonprofit organization in West Greenville, which is considered a food desert area. Many of the students enrolled are from fatherless communities and experience a high rate of psychological issues and needs. The Center’s mission is focused on “educating and equipping in a way that brings dignity and hope” (“Mission”). The building was previously Center of Hope Ministries and became Third Street Community Center in 2012. From 2013 to 2015, Third Street Academy established its community outreach and all boys’ Pre-K to 2nd grade program. It also launched its commercial landscaping business, Third Street Facility Services, for revenue and “gainful employment” for those considered difficult to employ**.** In 2016, Nathan White became the executive director of Third Street Community Center, and the same year, the organization’s board changed the name to Third Street Education Center to support its mission, vision, and strategy (Williams).

The specific area where I volunteer is Third Street Academy. It is a nonprofit, private Christian all boys’ school for grades K-4. The academy emphasizes “spiritual formation,” “character development,” and “high academic standards” (Third Street Academy). In 2017, the academy added third grade. As of Fall 2018, the academy serves Pre-K-4 grades. There are currently four-one students enrolled, ninety-four percent of whom are African American. All students enrolled in the academy are required to participate in the afterschool/extended learning program (Williams).

Literature Review

Although my research will focus on community writing, research on community literacy can also guide my project. Therefore, the previous research has yielded various results on both community literacy and community writing centers.

Scribner and Cole’s 1981 *The Psychology of Literacy* is referenced across a variety of texts as a model for acknowledging broader view of literacy and literacy practices. This text examines the practices of Vai culture, a group of Liberian people, who speak Mande and are primarily reliant on farming as a mode of survival. Scribner and Cole identify how this group’s normal practices fit into a functional literacy that is effective for their tasks. They conclude that “literacy-without-schooling is associated with improved performance on certain cognitive tasks” and that “nothing in our data would support the statement quoted earlier that reading and writing entail fundamental ‘cognitive restructurings’ that control intellectual performance in all domains” (Cushman et. al 136). Like my current and future research, this work provides an alternate way of perceiving literacy. It pushes back against the idea that formal schooling is necessary to one’s intellectual success and ability to secure an economic position.

In her 1994 work, *Literacy Across Communities*, Beverly Moss focuses on the sermon as a literacy event in the African-American church. Her research focuses on the written and oral literacy practices that African-American preachers engage in to prepare and deliver their sermons, in addition to the practices of the congregation throughout a typical service. In analyzing these practices, Moss compares the community literacy practices to the academic literacy practices. This work is beneficial because the racial make-up and religious background is similar to the population I study for my project. The adult populations Moss studies is representative of a diverse educational background that shares similar values and faith. As does Moss’s research, my project questions the connection of practices to an academic setting. However, my research also questions how the use of self-efficacy in this academic setting connects to a nonacademic setting.

In her 2014 article, “Investigating Adult Literacy Programs through Community Engagement Research: A Case Study,” Wells discusses a case study based on a community-university literacy center partnership. This article discusses the benefits of Lafayette’s Adult Resource Academy’s (LARA) open-entry open-exit program, as well as the challenges of limited labor and learning resources. While the adults served are from high-crime, low-income environments, the population is unspecified. Further, the locations for LARA are in predominantly white locations. My research aims to focus on adult populations that are predominantly African American and other people of color, as personal experiences and observations have drawn me to consider the resources and challenges that exist for them. Issues of access and opportunity can historically be connected to race, which can affect minorities’ ideas about their performance. Therefore, this project will take up this discussion and raise questions for further study.

Method

For this research, I used observations and data analysis from my experience as a volunteer at Third Street Academy. Observations allowed me to focus on interactions that are not always captured in written form. Observations were necessary to the discussion of how student behavior relates to self-efficacy. Data analysis allowed me to refer to oral and written texts. Written texts included those within the organization, in print, or on Third Street Academy’s website. Data analysis provided me with the information needed to analyze content, word choice, and presentation. For historical information on the organization, I also incorporated data obtained with permission from previous interviews conducted during a grant writing and proposal writing course.

Methodology

In order to identify the literacy practices the young men utilized, I used my observations from volunteering for three months in the afterschool’s STEAM/ STEAM Literacy program. The STEAM program is focused on science, technology, engineering, art, and math. It exposes students to learning about plant life, animal life, robotics, and various types of music. STEAM Literacy is a program established in 2018 that combines their STEAM learning with oral and written comprehension of topics that range from plant and animal life to the human body. I observed five literacy practices that the young men engaged in throughout this experience. They were relevant spiritual application; questioning of selves, peers, and staff; reconceptualization of language; incorporation of popular culture; and the Third Street creed of self-affirmation. Of these five literacy practices, I chose to focus on two. My selection was based on the literacy practices I observed consistently and could analyze most effectively. Further, I considered practices that were most applicable to the students’ self-efficacy, or their self-beliefs about their ability to produce (Parjeles).

After completing a spring proposal and grant writing course connected to the organization, I volunteered from May to June 2018 and September to November 2018. During the summer, I volunteered three times a week and once a week during the fall. In that time, I made my observations of the literacy practices among the young men. Yet, it was not until this course that I realized these practices were relevant to their learning about reading, writing, and speaking.

To properly unpack and develop this project, connect these literacy practices to self-efficacy, and introduce the role they may have in adult self-efficacy, I focused specifically on reconceptualization and the Third Street Academy creed of self-affirmation. I selected reconceptualization of language because this was a practice that the students regularly engaged in as they conversed one another and with staff and as they learned different concepts. The creed is a practice that I observed periodically. For this reason, I also used data analysis. The self-creed is a document available to students, parents, staff, and faculty, but its visibility via the school’s website makes it visible to outsiders as well. This wide accessibility invites other students into a space that has proven itself inclusive and supportive. The creed is as follows:

I am a Third Street Academy Gentleman.

God, my Father in Heaven, made me.

I am a child of the King, made in His image, and destined for greatness.

Therefore, I am strong, kind, courteous, honest, obedient, and brave.

I am a Third Street Academy Gentleman (Third Street Academy).

Results

After conducting the project, I recognized that the response of the academy played a major role in the students’ ability to achieve academically. The academy’s mission of “educating and equipping in a way that brings dignity hope” was emphasized, as students’ individual learning styles were supported. The staff constantly affirmed the students’ positive actions by praising their decisions to share or exhibit strong leadership skills. Contrarily, they used negative actions as teachable moments. To do this, staff and volunteers referred to the vision and the creed, which are both based on spiritual values. If a lesson had been previously taught, they would refer to this lesson to make it relevant to the situation. The staff not only acknowledged literacy practices but encouraged the students to use them often. They also incorporated them into the layout of the program. For instance, students learned certain phrases beyond the classroom context for nonacademic purposes and connected them academically. An example is a phrase that I heard constantly during one volunteer experience. On a day that the students gave oral presentations for STEAM Literacy, they became excited and talkative while some of their peers presented. As a result, I spoke to them briefly about courtesy as listeners. Some of the students replied in acknowledgment and respect using terminology that was unfamiliar to me.

They used the phrase, “yea ma’am,” to acknowledge their understanding of their behavior and agree to respond more respectfully to their classmates. I have heard them use “yes” and “yes ma’am” regularly as well, but this particular instance was different. This was a shared experience among them, and their repetition of the phrase showed me that they were awareness of its meaning and that I would understand it as well because it was an answer in the affirmative. They may have also assumed that I had some familiarity with it, but I cannot confirm their thoughts without direct conversation with them. Although I have no knowledge of the original text, I realize they had taken the language they learned outside of the academy and making it fit inside the academy when it was applicable. I did not question the phrase, and neither did the other teachers or volunteers present. Instead, I saw that the teachers understood that this use of language supported students’ ability to conflate their personal lives with their personal lives as learners. They were either humored and quiet about the students’ actions. The positive reactions of recipients revealed that students were in an environment that accepted students as themselves while exposing to spiritual values that helped them grow and develop their identities, rather than pushed them to confirm to limited institutional standards.

Further, through data analysis, I found that the recitation of the creed of self-affirmation encouraged learners to begin perceiving themselves as images of God. The words represent an explicit acknowledgement of learners’ identities and how that identity impacts the types of futures they have. Students have reminders of how the school views them and the ways in which they should view themselves. Since the students regularly engage in spiritual application, the students in all grade levels have a reverence of God and acknowledge His omnipotent role. Therefore, this creed, whether recited or referenced, appears to provide more confidence for them to apply themselves fully to their academic and social tasks to be positive representatives of Christ. The creed is personal rather than broad. The qualities emphasized help students considered qualities that they have or can develop as a Third Street gentleman. In the time that I volunteered, I saw some students’ attitudes shift from negative and withdrawn to positive and participatory. Through this creed, the academy provides an alternative to alternate and perceptions about themselves that may be pervasive for students.

Analysis

 This project revealed that Third Street Academy’s afterschool program has the support that may not always be present in academic spaces. This support shows the promotion of a conflation of home and academic spaces. Perhaps the institution’s status as a private school allows for could potentially provide a heuristic for other spaces, specifically nonacademic spaces. The small student population allowed for more one-on-one interaction and the opportunity for individuals in high leadership positions to get to know the students. Third Street Education Center’s director and Third Street Academy’s principal were familiar with each student, simply based on the hands-on involvement that each of the staff and faculty have in the students’ success. Yet, consistent parental involvement was also a part of the program’s layout. The Academy emphasized that community was vital for students’ empowerment. The student

Because I am interested in serving adult minority populations in a community writing center setting, I can use some of the successful strategies that the organization employs, I believe that this academic space might be beneficial to study as I consider ways that the literacy practices are deemed as valuable even when considered beyond the general term of literacy.

Discussion

 This project provided me the opportunity to explore specific ways an academic setting viewed literacy, responded to literacy practices utilized by its student populations, and offered a heuristic for nonacademic populations. Since the environment played a role in students’ self-efficacy, I will need to conduct more research into how current academic environments either encourage or discourage similar practices, how this impacts self-efficacy for youth, and the degree this impact has on their performance in adulthood in nonacademic environments. Further research might reveal how similar literacy practices among an adult population might contribute to greater success of community literacy/writing programs. I am interested in what adult programs might benefit from this heuristic, which ones may not, and the reasoning for the success for some and not others.

 Writer’s Reflection

African Americans and people of color have engaged in literacy practices before they were recognized as literacy practices. As a member of the African-American community, I have benefited and experienced challenges with the practices that appear valuable to its members. Therefore, I would like others to acknowledge and understand the value of these practices beyond academic spaces. By introducing yet another perspective on adult literacy, I hope to compel western society to recognize its historical practices—specifically those that have contributed to the ways that various communities voluntarily and involuntarily interact within and outside their communities for self-advocacy. Further, I hope to emphasize a need to support all aspects of literacy. Literacy is multifaceted, and I continue to learn about ways that seemingly innocuous tasks and acts serve as tools to progress groups of people, especially underrepresented groups. I am excited to join other scholars in promoting

With this project, I struggled most with the best method with developing what facet of literacy I wanted to focus on that would be applicable to my research interests. Once I narrowed down my focus to literacy practices in a youth population, I wanted to determine how these practices were beneficial. In speaking to Dr. Banks and my peers, I gained better insight into what might be beneficial to study short-term for the project, as well as for my future research. This project has helped me to narrow down my focus when I transition to dissertation research. While the methods were fitting for this course, I expect that interviews or a case study may be most effective, especially because I may have the opportunity to work with an adult population. Personal narratives about self-efficacy can be articulated firsthand, rather than simply observed. Initially, I thought that interviews may provide more research, the observations and analysis revealed the information needed to gather a sense of students’ self-efficacy. While the research primarily focuses on interviews and case studies, I have not allotted for time to obtain IRB-approval and conduct empirical or qualitative research.

One point that I have to make is to ensure that I am clear about my idea of literacy and my focus on community writing centers. As I continue to build upon my research across courses, I hope that I can for now discuss connections between the data and what types of data can inform my future research. Like with my other projects, I find it most difficult to commit to the terminology of “community literacy centers.” For my research thus far, I have used this term because of the wider availability of literacy centers compared to community writing centers. For this project, the term, literacy centers, is probably an acceptable term because of the focus on the practices. Yet, when I explore this term further, I want to shift to community writing centers effectively.

For this work in progress, I want readers to answer questions related to clarity about the project’s intended direction, the value they see in focusing on adult literacy, and how this project might be further fleshed out to address the needs of the target population.

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