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Characterizing Johnnieruth: High-school students, “tomboy” characters, and ideological becoming

by

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Abstract

This research was focused on how minority characters are constructed in school-based readings of literature. Using microethnographic discourse analyses of a post-reading discussion, we examined how a small group of high-school students characterized a minority protagonist in a short story. We focused on the intercontextual processes for reading literature, the recognition work done in the group, and the themes that emerged as students described the character. We found that students drew on patterns and processes

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established in the class, but that these practices were disrupted when students began to describe a protagonist that challenged gender-role expectations. These insights can inform efforts to develop critical literacy in literature classes.

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For the last several decades the use of counternarratives has been linked to culturally relevant pedagogy and to the development of critical perspectives. These connections rest on the assumption that encountering new perspectives will validate the experiences of minority students, foster empathy for those experiences, and increase all students’ awareness of how power and privilege play out in the lives of individuals.

One sticking point in this scenario, however, is the fact that school reading is most often a public act, not a private one. The understandings that students develop are mediated not only by their personal beliefs and recollections of texts, but also by the tasks they are assigned (Beach, 2005; Pace, 2003; Sumara, 1996) and the ways that these tasks are completed (Pace, 2006; Smagorinsky, 2001). This reality suggests that developing critical perspectives through literature study depends somewhat on how post-reading activities are enacted and what versions of a text become privileged.

In this report we consider how a small group of students made sense of a minority-identified protagonist in a short story. We focused on character construal because characters and their actions provide points of connection with literature. Characters model ways of being in the world (e.g. Bruner, 1986; Rosenblatt, 1938; 1978; Sumara, 2002). They offer a glimpse of how protagonists understand and confront obstacles and of how individual differences and motives are judged in both story worlds and in classroom communities (Beach, 1997; Pace, 2003; Pace & Lowery, 2001; Spears-Bunton, 1990).

We elected to examine students’ constructions of a minority protagonist because such characters often encounter experiences that challenge dominant ideologies. Whether or not students engage with these experiences and examine these ideologies can turn on

the way that minority characters are construed. To examine how students understood the young female African American protagonist, we conducted a microethnographic discourse analysis (Bloome et al, 2005) of a small-group discussion of a short story. We developed two research questions that focused on both the context and content of the discussion: What intercontextual processes did students draw upon as they negotiated the interpretive tasks assigned? What thematic threads emerged as the group characterized the protagonist?

Theoretical Framework

As our questions suggest, we were concerned with the discursive practices in the setting and with how students negotiated those practices to characterize the protagonist in the studied short story. These questions assume a sociocultural view of language in use and draw on Bakhtin's theories of dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981; 1986). They also support our understanding that overlapping dialogues—those situated in the classroom and those developed by the dialogic tensions in literature—co-exist and tamper with each other in ways that can enhance or hinder a critical perspective in literature study.

The contexts of post-readings

Our first area of focus was the contextualized nature of classroom discussions of literature. All human activity is situated and dynamic. Literature discussions are particular situations located in specific, historically bound contexts. Students and teachers meet in classroom spaces at regular intervals to engage in activities related to literacy. Over time discourses specific to the context suggest ways of reading and responding to texts. These discourses are more than simple exchanges of linguistic signs; they are instances of "speech communication" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 67) that cohere through thematic threads, style, and compositional structures, such as question types, turn-taking, and other such patterns.

Speech communications are multilayered and reflect understandings that are tied to the moment and to individuals' perception of context, identities, and power. At the point of utterance, these factors mediate contributions to the discourse and how those contributions are understood. Thus, they mediate how participants think about and pay attention to the issues at hand.

The discourses that make up speech communication turn on “recognition work,” attempts that participants make to get others to “recognize people and things as having certain meanings and values with certain configurations or relationships” (Gee, 1999). Both teachers and students engage in recognition work. When recognition work is successful, and some mode of it must be, the meanings and values embedded in the recognized configurations are privileged, and other meanings and values are marginalized. Recognition work focuses attention in this way rather than that, and it illustrates one way that power and dominance are exercised through the multiple forces embedded in discourses.

Recognition work, dialogism, and ideological becoming

The idea of recognition work provides a framework for thinking about how particular meanings and values are assigned during group process. Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism provides a similar framework for considering how particular values and understandings are developed within each individual. Bakhtin suggests that each person is a work-in-progress who experiences internal “struggles for hegemony” (1981, p. 341) among competing discourses. This never-ending process makes up each person’s “ideological becoming,” and it is fueled by two types of discourses: authoritative discourses and internally persuasive discourses.

Authoritative discourses represent the tradition and authority into which we are born. They reflect the dominant discourses of a culture, the recognition work accomplished by those in power through the ages. They are reflected in the words of “the father, of teachers, of law.” We are born into these discourses; we inherit them. Internally persuasive discourses, on the other hand, are encountered through experience. We may live through these experiences or encounter them in the voices of others. They may be shared in dialogue, encountered in literature or other forms of narrative. When they are salient to us, we appropriate them and tint them with our own sense making. Bakhtin observes that as we mature, alignments between authoritative discourses and internally persuasive discourses are unlikely.

Ideological becoming, recognition work, and critical understandings of literature

Bakhtin’s views of opposing discourses and his description of ideological becoming suggest that the characters readers encounter in literature play a role in the

development of critical understandings. As readers encounter characters and the cultures they inhabit in narrative worlds, they have opportunities to consider how those characters think and act and how they respond to other characters. Readers learn of characters' lived experiences in a contextualized world. When the dominant ideologies that are rendered in the world impede the self-actualization of a central character, readers have opportunities to interrogate those ideologies. Whether or not they do so depends on multiple factors, such as their initial understandings of texts, the text they have constructed as they read, and the text that they recall once the reading process has ended.

In classrooms when student groups gather to make sense of texts or characters, they engage in recognition work through which they evaluate characters' experiences and what those experiences might mean. They attempt to get others to recognize these experiences and actions as having particular meanings or displaying certain values. They pass judgments, find explanations for ambiguities, and draw conclusions about the work and about the human experiences it portrays. During these post-reading events, power relations and peer pressure come into play (e.g. Enciso, 1998; Finders, 1997). Students are likely to support a peer's assertions rather than to seek contrary evidence (Smithson & Dias, 1996). Some ideas trump others, and some aspects of a text become privileged as the recognition work unfolds. Personal, private understandings can shift in ways that encourage or silence the sympathetic or contrary voices of student readers who see the characters' experiences in a certain light. In some cases, those fictionalized experiences that individuals found internally persuasive may no longer be so (Pace, 2006).

The verbal, written, or symbolic texts that students construct in small-group discussion are a configuration of the author's work that students construct. This "articulated text" (Smagorinsky, 2001) is shaped by recognition work and by the "intercontextual" (Heras, 1993, cited in Bloome, 2006) and stable nature of classroom processes that have become ritualized. In a literature class the discussion of literature is an intercontextual process that is shaped by habits and by previous enactments of the event. Intercontextual processes are related to each other through the manner and substance of the discursive practices that come into play during each occurrence of the event. Each enactment is influenced by previous enactments as events become embedded in intercontextual relationships with each other. Intercontextual events establish patterns

of thinking and acting in the setting. Recognition work, then, is not just influenced by the power of the individuals in the group; it is also influenced by intercontextual relationships and practices. As we addressed the above questions, we considered intercontextuality as well as recognition work as students construed a version of the protagonist.

Methods

In this research, we used microethnographic discourse analysis of a classroom literacy event (Bloome et al, 2005) in an eleventh-grade U.S. literature class to investigate the way that students constructed a minority protagonist in short story. Three elements were central to the research process: the text, the context, and the discussion that unfolded after students had read the story. Each element is discussed below.

The text

“Johnnieruth,” (Birtha, 1981) presents the view of a 14-year-old, African American girl who is questioning her sexual orientation. In the opening page, Johnnieruth describes the women in her neighborhood and the conventionally gendered behaviors she has observed. She claims that she does not fit in, that she resists getting “dressed up” for church, and that her mother is baffled by her attitude, her behavior, and her choice of clothes—which usually consist of a t-shirt and jeans. She presents an episode from her childhood in which she is walking to church with her mother and they approach a woman from the neighborhood. The woman, who is ostracized by the community, is not attending the Sunday morning service. She is standing in her front yard and she wears a man’s shirt. Johnnieruth makes eye contact with the woman and the incident sparks her imagination. She begins to consider that there are “different ways to be” in the world. After that encounter Johnnieruth buys a ten-speed bike for her paper route and for exploring the world beyond her neighborhood. Initially, she rides with a group of boys, but when they say insulting things about the girls she knows, she begins to ride alone. In the final page of the story she describes her trek to the city park and a couple she sees kissing in the shadows. When they realize that Johnnieruth is watching, one of them removes her hat. Johnnieruth realizes that she has seen two women kiss. The women laugh, and Johnnieruth jumps on her bike and speeds up a steep hill, laughing and singing all the way.

“Johnnieruth” offered a perspective that is not commonly included in US schools. The inclusion of the story in Angela’s curriculum reflected her commitment to equity and to diversity. She wanted to expand the canon of literature studied in her classroom and to expose students to diverse perspectives. Additionally, including this story was part of her response to issues raised by scholars (e.g. Nieto, 1996; Sleeter & Grant, 1999) and by professional organizations that focus on school safety for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students (e.g., National Education Association [NEA] 1991, Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network [GLSEN] 1994). Though these students often face hostility on campus, it has become increasingly difficult for US teachers to address this form of bigotry or the topic of sexual orientation. Attempts to do so have been branded as efforts to “promote the gay lifestyle” and have led to court battles and laws that prohibit school officials from speaking about gay or lesbian issues in a positive or even a neutral way (Human Rights Watch, 2001). While issues surrounding sexual orientation are frequently part of a political dialogue in the US, they are often marginalized or completely forbidden in some US schools. Our decision to use this story was based, in part, on our sense that students were unlikely to have addressed these issues in a formal way in the context of a classroom.

The research context

The studied event was a small-group discussion of “Johnnieruth.” The discussion took place in an eleventh-grade English class in a high-school dual enrollment program that met on a community college campus in the United States. Students in this program are high-school juniors and seniors who enroll in both high school and college courses. They are qualified for admission to college and have an opportunity to interact with both high-school peers and college students. They have diverse schedules and are unlikely to share classes or form cliques. Students in this class were representative of the dual-enrollment population. All were members of middle-to-upper class socio-economic groups. Thirteen students identified themselves as White. One student identified as African-American and one as Puerto-Rican.

Five of these students volunteered to participate. This group consisted of Richard (all names are pseudonyms), an African-American male; Jack, a white male; Sonya, a white female; Austin, a white male; and Denise, a white female. These five students had

not collaborated as a group previously, and they were not part of an out-of-class social network. All participants were placed in the same discussion group and their conversation was recorded. Students were asked to read the story and to write their initial thoughts or questions about the text. After the prewriting activity, students discussed the text and described the setting of the story, the protagonist, conflict(s), plot elements (i.e. rising action, climax, and so on), and the overall theme.

Transcripts were then analyzed to identify contrastive instances and thematic cohesion. Contrastive instances are moments in the event during which breaks with intercontextual patterns become visible. In analyzing the data, we looked for contrastive instances during which students broke with established practices of literature study. We understood these instances to have “contrastive relevance” (Gee & Green, 1998, p. 126) that pointed to shifting patterns of communication.

The second element of focus in the analysis of data was thematic cohesion, the “organization of meaning in and through the event” (Bloome et al, 2005, p. 33). Cohesion within discussion has been linked to proficiency and to the development of discussants’ understandings of literature (Almasi et al, 2001). In a discussion of literature, the theme might appear to be just the work. However, thematic cohesion is focused on the topics that arise as speakers and listeners address the work and on links among ideas that emerge. Considering thematic coherence provided insight into what ideas were taken up or discarded. While contrastive instances highlight change in the group processes, thematic cohesion provides a record of how the members of the group reached consensus and what themes constituted that consensus. Considering both contrastive instances and thematic cohesion provided insight into the recognition work carried on by the group. It allowed us to examine how the students approached and completed the assigned tasks and what happened as they did so.

Findings and Discussion

Intercontextuality and established practices of literature study

In this eleventh-grade English class, discussing literary texts was a well-established practice. Angela’s approach to literature instruction was based on her experience, her purposes, and her considerable research as an advanced graduate student in English / literacy studies. She developed a sequence of activities that framed literature

study and included private reading, response writing, and public discussion. In some instances, crafting a formal essay completed the process.

In addition to an established sequence of activities for literature study, Angela encouraged an open-minded stance toward texts and other members of the class. She eschewed the idea of “right” answers to questions of literary interpretation, and she assigned texts that presented diverse perspectives, such as “Johnnieruth.” She modeled an exploratory stance towards literature and purposefully used uncertainty markers (Townsend, 1993) to encourage students’ participation and this exploratory view.

She supported small-group discussion by providing students with a semi-structured guide to help them focus on the task. The guide prompted students to consider issues of form (i.e., literary devices and aspects of plots, such as rising action and climax) and issues of content. (i.e. theme, nature of the conflict, analyses of characters). Students were required to use the text in their discussion and to support their ideas with references from the text. Deciding how to approach these tasks and how to develop consensus was the group’s responsibility.

Data analysis confirmed that elements of intercontextuality were apparent in the discussion of Johnnieruth. Before the discussion, students had followed the usual sequence of private reading and writing. The guide framed group work, and students approached the tasks on the guide efficiently. In general, students mimicked the stances that Angela had modeled. They used tentative language and uncertainty markers. Throughout most of the discussion students acknowledged and built on each other’s contributions.

Finally, the students reflected established class routines by connecting assertions with evidence from the text. Finding these connections directed much of their conversation. Generally, one student would make a claim that would then be negotiated by the group. Students found passages to support the assertion and rarely made claims that they did not try to substantiate with the text. For most of the class period, students worked methodically through the guide. As they articulated an understanding of the story, issues of content were more likely to be negotiated than those of form. As the discussion unfolded, the group’s most vexing issue was how to describe Johnnieruth.

Contrastive instances and characterizing Johnnieruth

Students' efforts to characterize Johnnieruth became a contrastive instance during which patterns of communication shifted. Prompted by the discussion guide to describe Johnnieruth, the students seemed to struggle with how to do so. The turn taking became less structured and students appeared to grapple with culturally coded meanings. Students' efficient move through the discussion guide was disrupted, and students returned to the task of describing Johnnieruth multiple times.

Students first approached the character during the initial moments of the discussion as they confronted a central issue: Johnnieruth's gender identity.

Sonya: I was like, oh, ok--this is what the story is about, you know...

Jack: Well, what did you think about it?

(Talk-over chattering among several group members)

Jack: Yeah, yeah, she's a tomboy....

Sonya: Yeah, that's what I was thinking too.

Jack: She likes to ride around on bikes--she likes to hang around with the boys all the time.

In this snippet of dialogue students are unsure of how to articulate their perceptions of Johnnieruth. While Sonya's initial comment is vague, she describes a moment of recognition in her thinking: "Oh, okay, I was like this is what the story is about." She does not explain the "this," and Jack is equally vague when he asks what she thinks "about it." The students are energized by the topic, and several students speak at once resulting in an inaudible clip of dialogue. Someone uses the term "tomboy," and Jack claims it as an appropriate descriptor. Sonya agrees. Then Jack refers to the text for evidence to back up his thinking. In doing so he suggests that he is defining "tomboy" as "boyish behavior" (Merriam Webster) and that Johnnieruth's tomboy behavior is riding her bike and hanging "around with the boys." Jack's attempt to get the group to recognize this meaning is not effective, and the group moves to another task on the discussion guide.

As the class begins to wind down, however, the students realize that they have not described Johnnieruth and they refocus. Richard begins by hinting at the issue of

sexuality. "She was a little..." he begins but does not finish his sentence. He begins again and offers the term "tomboy" as a way of fulfilling the requirement.

Richard: We gotta describe her so, I thought "tomboy."

Jack: Yeah, I put "tomboy." She doesn't like... go with anyone else....

Sonya: She's only 14.

Austin: But she wasn't a tomboy the whole story 'cause when the guys started talking to other girls she left and she started riding alone.

Richard: Um, well she's was still a...tomboy she just

Austin: Yeah, I think she was....

(laughter)

Denise: Um, this probably doesn't have anything to do with it, but the way that she saw [that woman] when she was walking to church, how she [that woman] was wearing like, a guy's shirt and like, how they looked at each other....

Richard: and they looked and smiled and everything? Yeah, I think she's...yeah....

Jack: Yeah! (laughs)

[laughter]

During this final attempt the students seem more comfortable with "tomboy." However, as we discuss in the next section, the meaning of the term seems to shift as students move away from the denoted meaning initially proposed by Jack. The students again use laughter, and they appear to ignore one group member's concerns. These changes are subtle, but they suggest that the social practices of the group shift as they attempt to characterize Johnnieruth.

Thematic coherence and characterizing Johnnieruth

Focusing on thematic coherence provides a way of tracking the sequence of ideas expressed, the way that ideas build or are discarded, and the way that power reinforces recognition work to shape the gist of the conversation. For the most part, the students moved easily through the story. They seemed to draw on the practices for literature study that had been established in the class. The most obvious instance of thematic coherence in the conversations about Johnnieruth was the shifting definitions of "tomboy."

Defining “tomboy.” In the initial exchange Jack appears to use “tomboy,” to denote the boyish behavior of girl children, and he reinforces this meaning by referencing the text and identifying specific behaviors that he sees as boyish: “She rides around on bikes—she likes to hang around with boys.” The group does not challenge Jack, but they move on to another topic.

When the group returns to characterizing Johnnieruth, Richard again uses “tomboy.” Austin’s follow-up suggests that he understands tomboy as more than boyish behavior when he notes that Johnnieruth “doesn’t go with anyone.” Sonya’s picks up that thread but raises a contrary point. Johnnieruth is “only 14.” The comments of Austin and Sonya suggest that Johnnieruth’s identity has shifted. The group has moved beyond the denoted meaning of “tomboy” to a connoted meaning. In the US “tomboy” is often culturally coded as a synonym for “lesbian.”

Thus, both Austin and Sonya embellish and complicate Richard’s recognition work. Austin moves “tomboy” toward a culturally coded meaning. Even though Sonya counters that move, her comment suggests that she has understood new coding. Though Austin observes that Johnnieruth is not a tomboy for the “whole story,” Richard disagrees and asserts, “she was still a...tomboy.” In doing so he suggests that tomboy is not tied to behavior but to identity.

During this exchange, the students come to recognize a coded meaning for “tomboy.” Once they have done so, the negotiation closes. Denise returns to intercontextual practices and begins to locate textual references that support this revised reading of “tomboy.” She points out the man’s shirt that a minor female character wore and the “look” that passed between an outcast older woman and Johnnieruth. These details support the recognition work and construe Johnnieruth in a certain way. Richard punctuates Denise’s comment by repeating parts of it. The word “tomboy” with all of its ambiguity and cultural weight is recorded on the discussion guide.

Other thematic concerns. While the microanalysis of the above dialogue focuses on the groups’ use of the “tomboy,” other thematic threads did emerge. Students spent considerable time discussing the role of clothing and its connection to gender in the story. Johnnieruth describes women whose dress violates the gender-role expectations in her

neighborhood. The students connect Johnnieruth to these two women and use clothing as evidence for substantiating the “individual vs. society” conflict they assigned to the story.

During the conversation, one student observes that the requirement for dressing “the same” is a cultural practice. Others agree, but they do not challenge this practice or make connections to their own experiences. Indeed, as students discuss dress, they are wearing the same clothes as the protagonist. During this exchange, and in others, students failed to make personal connections between their experiences and the protagonist. At one point, Austin does observe that Johnnieruth needs to be in a place where a person is not judged by “dress for church and stuff,” an empathetic view of Johnnieruth was rare.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to build understanding of how class routines and the recognition work carried out in peer groups mediate understandings of literature and the development of critical perspectives. We found, not surprisingly, that the students’ discussion was heavily influenced by intercontextual processes and by the academic tasks assigned. As students engaged in recognition work to characterize Johnnieruth, they were confounded temporarily. However, they were also energized and focused.

The students’ brief encounter with Johnnieruth provided opportunities for them to negotiate the cultural codes embedded in language and to take-up contrary positions. Though these instances were fleeting, they offer a glimpse of possibilities for developing empathy, for understanding frequently marginalized voices, and for becoming aware of discourses that may, over time, become internally persuasive.

We would like to note that missing from this discussion was the negativity and hostility that has been described by others who have considered how diverse texts and topics are received in classrooms (e.g. Alvermann et al, 1997; Beach, 1997; Pratt, 1991). Though these students did not appear to connect with Johnnieruth or to see the nuances of the ideological roadblocks she faced, they did identify themes that might, overtime, lead to more complex understandings.

Reading “Johnnieruth” provided an opportunity for considering different ways of being in the world. Such opportunities can contribute to critical understandings of literature and to a world-view that is inclusive. Like Beach (2005) we understand that

such changes are likely to be subtle, part of an evolving understanding of what it means to live with and among others.

Reading and discussing literature in schools is a complex process that can support dominant ideologies and thwart critical analyses of those ideologies. However, it can also provide possibilities for negotiation, for sharing the experiences of others, for seeing the world through their eyes. We cannot know what the glimpse of another's perspective might mean in the long run or how it might become a factor in each student's ongoing internal struggle to become.

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