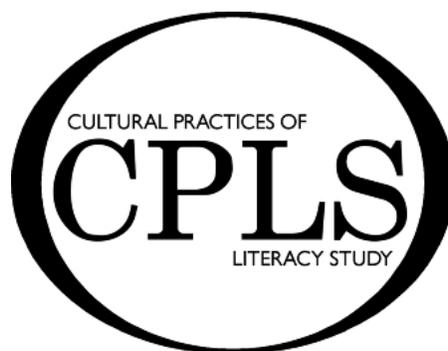


School and Home: Contexts for Conflict and Agency

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Three young children sit, small hands and feet still in anticipation, with eyes focused. Their father moves the pen gently across a folded page; his eyes survey a familiar landscape. She is the first to break the silence. Youngest, and the only girl, Erin¹ shouts out “dollhouse – 5-Across is 'dollhouse'.” Her father looks over; her brothers snicker at her excitement. After a quick smile he asks Erin how to spell “dollhouse” and together they see if 5-Across is actually “dollhouse.” Without correcting Erin’s spelling, and ignoring his sons’ suggestions, together they arrive at the correct spelling. A collective sigh of disappointment signals that 5-Across has eluded them for the moment. Erin’s smile is not extinguished, though, and she joins in laughter with her brothers. She laughs at the joy of being with her family and helping her father as he labors diligently over the gently folded evening press.

At another time, and in another place, another family is together in their car. Will sits in the backseat as his mother begins a story. She tells him of a young boy, not unlike himself, who is taking a walk to the park. She describes, in detail, the surroundings as the boy walks to the park. As he clears the last hill he can see the park and breaks into a run. Will’s mother describes how the park is laid out and all the different things in the park. Will sees the swings, slides, monkey bars, and teeter-totters. Just as the park grows closer, Will’s mother stops narrating the story. Will, though, quickly continues with the boy scrambling up a fence to get to the monkey bars without going around to the main park entrance. He tells of all the amazing tricks the boy does on the monkey bars. Then he stops; he and his mother laugh together. She quickly picks up the story; together they continue their turn-taking, fashioning an elaborate tale of a boy’s day in the park. The trip goes quickly; Will smiles the whole way.

Introduction

Participants and Connections

Will is a young Caucasian male, just under 6 feet tall. Will keeps his brown hair cut short, has a moderate amount of facial hair, and a slender build. Will quickly and easily relates to his fellow writing consultants. His casual disposition is reflected in his choice of clothing even though he tends not to wear t-shirts. Will's parents both have college degrees; his father also has a masters degree. Will and Erin, the two participants in this case study, both grew up in mid-western towns about an hour's drive from one another.

Erin is a young Caucasian woman, around 5 1/2 feet tall. She has long curly blond hair and a slender build. She is quick to joke with her fellow consultants and tends to wear clothes that reflect the fashion of the day. Erin's mother has an M.A. and her father completed some college.

Erin and Will are undergraduate students at a Big Ten university in the Midwestern United States, and they both work at the university writing center as consultants. The writing center serves the entire university community from first year students to tenured faculty. I share the writing center space with Will and Erin where I work as a graduate writing consultant. All but one of our conversations about their literacy practices took place in the writing center after hours.

Positionality of Researcher

During the data collection period of this study, my duties as a graduate writing consultant included working with writers and supervising and developing undergraduate writing consultants. Typical supervisory tasks included signing off on hours worked by undergraduate writing consultants and assigning and working with them on other writing center activities such as housekeeping, filing, and other tasks assigned by full time staff and faculty. Developmental

activities included time spent with undergraduate writing consultants, working on areas they are interested in or on graduate writing consultant concerns. I also helped consultants develop professional/academic goals and assisted them in reaching those goals. The writing center at this university assists all consultants through weekly meetings and optional trips to various writing center conferences that take place throughout the year. While in the center, consultants can continue their development by working with each other and full-time faculty on both academic and professional writing.

Working Relationship

Though I worked with both Will and Erin on a weekly basis, I also shared responsibilities and experiences with other graduate and undergraduate writing consultants. Most of my interactions with Will fell into supervisory activities such as signing off on hours and casual conversations before he showed interest in sharing with me his experiences with literacy in his life. On the other hand, I had a chance to work with Erin on one important piece of writing as a part of professional development before our conversations about her literacy practices began. The following is what I learned from my conversations with the both of them about their literacy practices. Their examples of multimodal text(s) (NLG, 1996), misrecognised resources, and blended domains (Luke, 2003) together offer new ways “to imagine a range of possible relationships between school and non-school contexts” (Hull & Schultz, 2002, p. 2).

Erin and Will's views of their literacy practices seemed to reflect the influences of two different sociotextual domains and two different discourses (Gee, 1989). Both family and school shaped their feelings and understandings of their literacy practices. Family provided Will and Erin with their first literacy practices. School either "recognized [,] misrecognized, remediated [or] converted" (Luke, 2003, p. 140) these primary practices and discourses. Erin and Will's

experiences of their literacy practices were both positively and negatively shaped by this. Analysis of the data revealed the themes of conflict and agency as this process took place, resulting in their current stances in relation to their own literacies.

Literacy Rooted in Home Practices

My conversations around literacy and literacy practice with Erin and Will led to memories and insights for all of us, particularly related to the ways that current literacy practices have their roots in past, home-based practices, experiences, and values. As they answered questions about the literacy practices of their families when they were children, they both reached new insights regarding the crucial roles played by their families in how they each understand literacy in their lives.

For Erin and Will, the home-based literacy practices did not exist as isolated from other social domains. Rather, each experienced an agency that was born through home-based literacy practices and that was further shaped through experienced conflict between those practices and literacy as practiced in school. This agency is now apparent--can be recognized--in the multimodal literacy practices that permeate their lives as young adults.

Erin and Will shared with me a range of literacy practices. Describing their lives as students, they both noted different types of texts and purposes for reading and writing that they engage with as a part of their academic studies. Though important to their success as students, these school literacy practices did not engage them as much in their conversations with me as did their "preferred" literacy practices. These were literacy practices that did not, in their minds, relate to school. Interestingly, while they also responded to my questions with descriptions of literacy practices within the writing center, neither chose to spend much time discussing the reading and writing they do as consultants. When they did speak about the writing center, it was

always briefly with the understanding that I, as a member of their working community, understood what they were talking about.

It was the out-of-school, or home, literacy events that seemed to most engage Will and Erin. Even their recalled practices of school-based literacy was related as it integrated into, and transformed, their personal, home-based literacies.

The earliest literacy events that both Will and Erin recalled were bedtime story rituals (Heath, 1984). They each mentioned these only briefly, in part because they both, in Will's words, saw these practices as "fairly standard reading." Other home practices, though, such as those highlighted in the opening narratives--crossword puzzles and story telling--connected in interesting ways to their current multimodal practices.

Bringing School Literacies into the Home and Community

Erin shared such an instance as she related how her mother's need for child care resulted in the introduction of academic literacy practices into her young life. Erin's mother returned to college when Erin was six years old to pursue a teaching certificate. There were times when a babysitter could not be found so that Erin's mother could attend the required classes. At those times, Erin and her siblings would find themselves sitting in a college class where "we would absorb a lecture and/or class reading."

As Erin's mother began bringing assignments home with her, many of which involved designing school lesson plans, the literacy activities in the home were transformed and expanded to include these school-based practices. The reading and composing of storybooks was one textual practice experienced by Erin as the result of this life process. Erin's mother would make storybooks for after-school programs and for Head Start preschool programs. She would do much of this work at home, enlisting the help and participation of Erin and her brothers.

Will shared another way in which school-based literacy was imported into the home literacy context, influencing the ways in which he continues to relate to a particular genre of writing even today. This is the genre of poetry, and Will's teacher in elementary school spent considerable time with his class on reading and writing it. Poetry was assigned and poems were written by the children, including Will. Will's poems were sometimes selected by his teacher and sent to the local newspaper for publication in a section of the paper that highlighted local student writing. Thus, a school-based literacy practice was exported to a community-based one. When Will's poems were published, his grandmother cut them out and posted them on the refrigerator, thus bringing these school-initiated texts into the home for reading and consideration as public texts authored by a family member.

Will recalls these events with relish. He recalls, "...writing because that was the assignment, and if it got in [the newspaper], Grandma would put [it] on her fridge and that was great!" Despite this apparently seamless importation of school literacy practice into out-of-school practice, conflicts between the influences of the social domains of school and home on literacy practice soon arose as a theme in the literacy stories told by both Will and Erin.

Conflict Between Home and School Literacies

Erin and Will's accounts of conflict differ. For Erin, the conflict began with the kind of literacy she had access to at home and that of school. At home, Erin enjoyed access to wide array of interesting books, provided by different family members. One recalled instance of this involved "a collection of history books with cartoons on different eras." These were very different, and much more engaging, from the books available to her at school--a fact that still remains very strong among Erin's memories of her childhood.

Erin also recalled with relish her addiction to such series as *The Little House on the Prairie* and *The Babysitters' Club*. Her memories of reading these books during her out-of-school time are especially fond. *The Babysitters' Club* books served a very specific purpose for Erin:

While when I was younger there were connections in terms of friendship and being on the brink of having any form of responsibility just, you know, being a girl who lives wherever and has friends. I identified with the people in the book whether babysitters or being babysat.

While Erin was engaged with reading texts not sponsored by her school or its teachers, Will was experiencing a disaffection with reading, overall. For him, peer pressure was telling him that "reading wasn't cool," and he did not engage in reading or writing outside of school for a long period of time--from early elementary school until ninth or tenth grade. Erin and Will, though, both reached a point in their lives where they felt the act and meaning of reading changed for them.

Personal Interest in Reading

Will recalls this change taking place during ninth or tenth grade. He recalls reading some of Hemingway's short stories "here and there in a car ride or something, but not actively." Will's narrative of this change in his perspective on the value and role of reading continues:

And then it was *Breakfast of Champions* by Kurt Vonnegut—I think the cover was bright orange caught my attention—lying around the house. That was the first book I enjoyed, (although) there had been books I read for school that I secretly enjoyed. That was the first one (though) where I said, "This isn't dorky; it's fun."

For Will, it is this change in his attitude toward reading that exposed the conflict between the school literacy practice domain and the new personal literacy practice domain of reading.

Outside of school, reading is now seen as a pleasurable and rewarding activity.

Erin, on the other hand, did not so much change her attitude toward reading, as expand the types of reading she engaged with. At this point in her literacy practice development, Erin recalled, she began to be influenced in her reading habits by those of her older brothers. Erin remembered specific authors—"Kurt Vonnegut, Tom Robbins, Philip Roth, and more contemporary authors"—that her brothers exposed her to. Erin recalled that if Tom, one of her brothers, "was reading something and sat it aside (he has pretty good taste) I would usually pick it up and read it too." By reading books that her brothers read, Erin not only felt she would be more likely to enjoy the reading, but was also able to bond with her older brothers. Thus the practice of recreational reading mediated the family social domain and helped to accomplish important social functions among family members.

Prior to these experiences Erin's main resource for books had been her local library. The library served Erin both as a place to get books from and a different system for picking from all the books she had available to read:

Our library in our town was not that great—if a book had ever been censored our library wouldn't carry it. It had a lot of Hemingway, Dickens, Jane Austen and things like that. When I was younger—in middle school—I would just go through an author so that got me away from *The Babysitters' Club* and *Little House on the Prairie* into actual literature.

Although Will did not mention a significant location for motivating reading of particular authors, he did mention influences of his siblings in his values toward reading and literacy practice. He recalled his older brother doing very little reading, although his older sister did read

from what he could remember. Will, however, was not interested in the things his sister read before he entered high school; his changing attitude toward reading affected this stance, though:

My sister, I don't know, it all kind of changed for me when I got into high school. Before that, I thought my sister (was) a nerd, so I made it pretty clear I wasn't interested in what she was going to suggest. Once I started getting interested, she'll occasionally give me books or tell me about books to read—I usually don't because I hate being told what to read. Sometimes, yeah, [I do read what she suggests].

For both Will and Erin, family remains an influential context for their reading practices. Though their attitudes toward reading differed during their tumultuous teenage years, Will and Erin still shared an awareness of this familial influence.

Agency

The interviews with Will and Erin revealed another important thread relevant to their developing literacy lives--that of *agency*. Through their narratives, one can see the development of agency on both their parts as they sorted out their likes and dislikes and as they responded to the various types of textual practices experienced within the different social domains in their lives.

The powerful role of home literacy worked its way into the types of literacy events Erin prefers and the ways in which she engages with them. As the youngest of three children, reading and writing had become an important bonding activity for her. Bonding could be seen both in the opening narrative, in the way Erin and her brothers gathered around their father, and in the literacy activities orchestrated by her mother from within the domain of school. There was, however, a point at which Erin began to initiate these textual practices on her own. Erin began to

pursue these connections through the simple action of reading the books her brothers read, but she continued it in her own way with crossword puzzles.

For Erin, crossword puzzles were a marker of literacy in the home second only to bedtime stories. Unlike bedtime stories, though, the crossword puzzles done by her father began as an activity in which Erin could participate. Her father did not discourage Erin and brothers, she recalls, as they “tried to help when we were six, but we could not spell yet.” Although its nature changed, such interaction over crossword puzzles with Erin’s father continued throughout her youth:

He still did the crossword puzzle in the Sunday paper, but our involvement lessened around the time we learned how to read, got a Nintendo, etc. Basically, when we could adequately amuse ourselves, we stopped bugging him. But I still tried to help occasionally.

As school literacy practices entered Erin's life, she grew less involved with the crossword puzzle activity at home. They were still ever-present, however, until her father’s death from cancer when she was 13, at which point crossword puzzles were no longer visible in her home. Erin, though, still remembered crossword puzzles as significant. It was not until the beginning of her junior year in college, however, that Erin began doing crossword puzzles again. For Erin, the first thing she thought of when considering crossword puzzles was how “[o]n some shallow level they make me feel smart.” She continued her narrative by almost immediately, mentioning her brothers:

Because there is a phrase with a blank there and what is going to be there? And [it provides] a sense of being smart and taking on the crossword puzzle. Plus I have older brothers who are incredibly smart—they both do crossword puzzles—Tom does them—Kevin is horrible at them and I’m better than him at them and I feel smart.

The importance of crossword puzzles for Erin and her brothers does not end with competition. It is still also used as a way of bonding. "When my brother is home we do crosswords puzzles together." Erin also uses crossword puzzles for social interaction outside of her family. For example, she often completes puzzles with another undergraduate student, George, with whom she has worked in the writing center.

I knew [George] all last year, but he never talked. And this year I have a little more down time so I would just ask him, "So what's another word for whatever?" And pull him in. I do that all the time with other people. Use it as a way to start a conversation or get people to talk. Randomly. That interests people and they really start to think about it and then they want to know if something else then they'll try and get something else.

Crosswords are a way for Erin to involve others in her literacy; they are, however, not the only way she uses literacy for interaction. Most of these other non-school interactions are restricted to her family, however. One example she mentions is of how she and her brothers send book reviews back and fourth via email. In this way she is able to continue the mutual reading that began in her youth.

Though Will does not express the same interest in crossword puzzles as Erin, he does talk about what types of reading and writing—especially personal writing—are important to him. Will describes the writing he does the most outside of school, as poetry and autobiographical writing:

I dabble in the poetry a little bit, but not seriously or anything. I guess a lot of the stuff I write is kind of almost autobiography stuff—creative non-fiction. Putting a little twist on what happened—making it more important than it was.

He connects his writing to the things he is reading by talking about “a natural urge to emulate it a little bit. Not seriously, but more seriously than before.” The seriousness of writing came up throughout our conversation about both his writing and that of his mother:

I know that my mom is a fairly good writer because of the letters and emails. I can tell she has some experience, but I don't know where that comes from she hasn't said here is a story I wrote.

The importance of authorship in writing as it relates to agency further surfaces as Will talks about his writing as it changed from youth, influenced by school practices, to that of a young adult:

I would write silly limericks or whatever we were asked to write. I wanted it to be good as I could—as much as a fourth grader can want that. There was no implication of getting better, I guess—improving my writing—I was writing because that was the assignment, and if it got [in the newspaper], Grandma would put on her fridge and that was great. In high school, I don't know if I seriously considered writing as a profession, but it has been in the back of my mind since I started reading. When you are pushed to practice or get better by whatever, then you have some eye on the future, which implies a goal—then it becomes serious because of a focus on improvement.

Will clearly connects reading, writing, and published works within notions of a profession or a public life for himself. Agency thus surfaces within different dimensions for him than it did for Erin as evidenced in her continued engagement with crossword puzzles.

Family, School, and Work.

For Erin, the crossword puzzle practice is a personal pleasure, one that is easy and which seamlessly emanates from the culture of her home and family:

You could be really deep about it and be like doing crossword puzzles is a way to reconnect with my dead father. It's not that deep. I didn't start doing crossword puzzles until like a year ago because I had a class that was extremely boring and I like picked up a paper on the way to class to do something that was subtle. It's nice I can do something my father did—it's nice my grandmother can be like aw [your father did crossword puzzles, but] it's not like that deep. It's not like I do them because I have a heritage of crossword puzzles or because I grew up with them around.

Clearly, Erin is asserting an agency with this anecdote. Yes, the family literacy practice did make the doing of crossword puzzles seem natural and 'normal.' Erin takes this practice, though, outside of the home domain and imports it into her school domain as a way of reading and writing that is engaging and enjoyable for her.

Insights

Erin and Will's views of their practices come through two important domains, discourses (Gee, 1989), for them. Both family and school shaped their views and understandings of literacy and literacy practices. Family, however, provided Will and Erin with their first literacy events. School either "recognized[,] misrecognised, remediated [or] converted" (Luke, 2003, p. 140) these primary practices (discourses) (Gee, 1989). The primary and, ultimately, influential role played by literacy practices that were begun and/or shaped in the home becomes apparent, though, through Erin and Will's accounts of their developing agency as actors in their own literacy lives.

These accounts by two middle-class young people, growing up in the Midwest of the United States, offer compelling suggestions and evidence for expanding our view of literacy development. Rather than seeing the development of individuals as practitioners of literacy as

primarily the function of schools, it seems more valid to expand our lens to view literacy development (defined as the development of literacy practitioners) as the function of both home literacy experiences and those of the school (Purcell-Gates, Jacobson, & Degener, in press).

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Footnotes

¹ All names are pseudonyms.