Critical Engagement Module 1

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Growing up as a young child in suburban NYC, and then a teenager in rural Ohio, I was exposed only to fairly homogeneously white, middle class communities. In my earliest understanding of the word literacy and its definition, I narrowly believed it to be what Gee calls "the ability to read and write" (Gee, 1989, 55). Thus, someone who did not possess any one of these abilities would therefore be, to some extent, illiterate. Further, I only considered the phonemes and morphemes, and the words and phrases they created (Fillmore, 2000, 14-15) to be language. This definition has proven to me, after the past three decades of scholarship and experience, to be simplistically inadequate on several levels.

As an undergraduate communication scholar, my understanding of what it means to be literate, was challenged. Instead of only viewing literacy from the lens of reading and writing, I began to replace the concept of language with the more encompassing category of *communication*. This included, not only written and oral communication, but also non-verbal communication. While Fillmore and Snow's examination of literacy was specific to spoken language, I am left also wanting some attention given to non-verbal communication's role in all of this. At the very least, Fillmore and Snow's first and fifth functions of which educators should know more, the teacher as communicator, and teacher as an agent of socialization (Fillmore, pp.

5, 11) can certainly not be complete without an examination of how non-verbal communication plays into them.

Fifty years ago, Watzlawick's first of five axioms of communication stated that "We cannot not communicate" (Watzlawick, 1967). Tone, posture, gestures, facial expressions, and physiological changes (e.g. blushing) are several of the many ways in which people can communicate more than just the words they are using. Just as how English learners have trouble structuring narrative and expository writing because of cultural differences in what is most important in a story (Fillmore, 28), there are a number of different ways in which non-verbal communication can be misinterpreted. For example, gestures can be one way in which powerful meanings can be different across cultures. In England, a circular forefinger and thumb gesture means "OK". In France it means "zero". While in Brazil, it is an extremely obscene gesture (Jandt, 2001). For this reason, I believe it, also, very important for educators to give attention to their non-verbal cues and how they are possibly interpreted by those outside their demographic group.

Fresh out of college, my first job was as a criminal investigator for the Columbus City Prosecutor's Office. It was here where I was first exposed to the power dynamic inherent because of the way people communicate. While our clientele were fairly well represented across racial lines, the majority of them were under-educated and under-employed. I was struck almost immediately by how I had to adjust my vocabulary to meet our clients at their relative literacy, having assumed understanding of words and concepts remedial to me, but foreign to them. Add the stress and shock of being a victim to a crime, and I quickly learned the importance of abandoning the standard language ideology (Lippi-Green, 1994, 437) of a law office and its

inherent power, in favor of the non-"dominant bloc" (Lippi-Green, 437) I interacted with on a daily basis.

My understanding of literacy evolved even further when I became an educator in a public school. The high school where I teach 9th graders American History, minority enrollment is 40 percent of the student body, the majority of that identifying as African-American. Thirty-one percent of our students also qualify for free and/or reduced lunch. Unfortunately, our staff does not look like our students. With the exception of one assistant and a few aides, our staff is nearly one hundred percent white, and middle-class.

In my American History classes, we trace back all that we learn to five interrelated themes: examining how *disagreement* leads to conflict; exploring how *imbalance* affects the dynamic between two or more parties; evaluating the influence on decisions from the desire to keep or increase *power*; investigating change resulting from *progress*; and analyzing how differences in belief systems or norms in *society* affect relationships. We refer to this as DIPPS. I could not help, as I read our four selections, studying them through the lens of our DIPPS, primarily imbalance and power.

My biggest take-away, I think, from the readings is how language and relative literacy is so often used by people in power, sometimes consciously, sometimes not, to remain in power. As Fillmore and Snow point out, English, unlike other European languages has never had a society whose responsibility it was to review the language and reform it (Fillmore, 25). This makes it easier for those already in a position of intellectual power to make the rules. Gee makes this connection by explaining how discourses are not only defined by those already in positions of power, but are maintained by these power-brokers, often to the detriment of others (Gee, 52).

The ability to continue this control over discourses is often what leads to the social imbalance in our country. Power of language generally lies with the educated, usually rich, older, white speakers at the top of their profession who define what professional language, as well as professional behavior, dress, etc. (Gee, 52). Delpit agrees by offering that "The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power" (Delpit, 282), and defining what we know now today as white privilege by explaining, "Those with power are frequently least aware of -- or at least willing to acknowledge -- its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence" (Delpit, 282).

But what are our obligations to our students? I see as my primary responsibility to my students to meet them, the best I can, where they are, intellectually, socially, and from a literacy standpoint, through the use of context, empathy, and allowing "...students their own expert knowledge…" (Delpit, 288). I once had a teacher who always said, "The room is always smarter", meaning, the teacher cannot always be the only expert in the room. It is neither efficient, nor possible. My goal is to, thus, empower them, while endeavoring to help them grow and be aware of the type of academic English they may be required to one day use, as we know that unfortunately they will be judged by the way in which they communicate (Delpit, 287). Literacy is in the eye of the beholder. It is a judgement by those in power of those who are not.

After examination of these four readings, I for the first time, I think, have been forced to look at my own practice and determine whether or not I'm doing all I can to break down what Lippi-Green calls language-trait focused discrimination (Lippi-Green, 437). I for the first time in nearly two decades have examined how language-trait focused discrimination may be an issue with my students. Only today, I apologized to them, realizing that my language and/or

vocabulary, while natural to me at my age and level of education, is often foreign to not only my minority or LEP students, but also my 9th graders in general.

The uninitiated may only think about language acquisition/literacy in terms of young learners. However, it is, now, my experience that this can be an issue for all students, even those who may graduate to that dominant bloc. For, not only is this a problem for language learners, but can be just as easily a problem because of the generational differences in slang, jargon, cultural references, meaning, and non-verbal cues.

References

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