

**Teacher Education and Critical Inquiry:
The Use of Activity Theory in Exploring
Alternative Understandings of Language and Literacy**

Brenton Doecke & Alex Kostogriz

Faculty of Education
Monash University

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Teacher Education and Critical Inquiry: The Use of Activity Theory in Exploring Alternative Understandings of Language and Literacy

Brenton Doecke & Alex Kostogriz
Monash University

Abstract

This paper explores the challenges of espousing a critical pedagogy within the managerial climate that presently shapes teacher education. It argues that current discourses of professionalism are incommensurate with a view of literacy as social practice and that they disregard complex semiotic ecologies in which both school and university students operate. Graduate teachers are constructed as the 'providers' of decontextualised literacy skills to school students whose existing communication networks are ignored. Rejecting this narrow view of professional practice, we draw on activity theory to analyse the social configuration of tertiary students' identities and the textual resources that mediate their professional learning. This kind of research is needed to reveal the contradictions within and between activity systems in which tertiary students participate as well as to construct possible solutions to the contradictions identified.

Introduction

All graduates, regardless of the age or level of students to be taught, will be expected to:

- Have knowledge of the role of language and literacy in learning
- Give attention to the teaching of English, especially reading, speaking, listening and writing, including spelling and grammar
- Have knowledge of literacy pedagogy
- Have basic knowledge of how to address literacy learning needs of second language learners

Victorian Institute of Teaching, 'Guidelines for Re-accreditation'

This statement is taken from a set of guidelines for the re-accreditation of teacher education programs prepared by the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT). Such guidelines reflect a managerial culture that has enveloped us all. It is impossible to avoid the language of outcomes, even though as teacher educators we may wish to argue that a truly productive pedagogy is always one which exceeds our expectations (cf. Barnes, 1976). And while we may wish to think of ourselves as opening up richer possibilities for critical inquiry and literacy pedagogy than the 'basic knowledge' invoked by this statement, we are also obliged to demonstrate that our students possess this knowledge.

Our own institution recently conducted an extensive review to show how our teacher education program met these and other criteria for re-accreditation, when we showcased 'Language and Literacy in Secondary School', a subject in which our students typically develop a more complex knowledge of language and literacy than that suggested by these dot points. But although the skills and knowledge they learn by engaging in this subject do indeed enable them to meet the outcomes specified by the VIT, it is not as though

these knowledges simply fold into each other. A tension exists between the knowledge implied by the VIT guidelines and larger conceptions of language and literacy, shaping our dialogue with students, and requiring us to rethink the possibility of ideological critique and social and educational transformation.

Our aim in this essay is to explore the complexities of espousing a critical pedagogy within a managerial climate involving the specification of outcomes like those listed above. Outcomes ideology has not only been imposed on teacher education from the outside but is something that we enact ourselves, through a variety of internal managerial processes by which we (teachers and students alike) demonstrate the productivity of our enterprise (cf. Reid, 1996, p.13). For Althusser, ideology involves more than the beliefs or values that an individual consciously accepts, but is enacted through a set of practices (if you go to confession and follow the rituals of the church, you will believe) (Althusser, 1971). Outcomes ideology produces or 'interpellates' (Althusser, 1971) a certain type of subjectivity that is evinced by the activities in which students engage as participants in tertiary education, not simply by the beliefs and values they hold. Whilst we affirm the possibility of social critique, involving the creation of teachers 'who regard teaching as a political activity and embrace social change as part of the job' (Cochran-Smith, 2002), such critique can only be the result of complex mediations, including a range of contradictory factors. Rather than assuming that we have agency merely by affirming a commitment to social change, we must accept the challenge of reconceptualising educational settings as complex networks or 'activity systems' (Engeström, 1999) that are shaped in diverse and contradictory ways.

No Heroic Tales

'Language and Literacy in Secondary Schools' was part of a new teacher education program which represented a significant departure from the traditional add-on, one year Graduate Diploma of Education that our institution had been offering for many years. Students fresh from secondary school were now able to enroll in a double degree, requiring them to complete a suite of subjects in Education at the same time that they were completing their other academic studies. This meant developing a curriculum that was more comprehensive than the combination of Foundation and Method subjects which usually constitutes a Graduate Diploma. Staff were thereby provided with an opportunity to make a significant public statement about the attributes they believed were desirable in beginning teachers. What kinds of professional learning did our students need to experience? Where could we begin our conversation with them? How could we facilitate their transition from the perspective of students to an understanding of the complexities of classrooms as seen by teachers? Should not all beginning teachers have an understanding of the way that language mediates knowledge and human relationships? How could we sensitise them to the increasingly diverse range of textual practices in which people engage in a postmodern world? Would they be able to reconceptualise their academic fields as types of literacy, and to recognise that they must teach their students to handle the conventions of those genres associated with specific fields of inquiry?

Our response to these last questions was to develop a subject that would require students not only to understand the complexities of language and literacy but to actively engage in

a diverse range of textual practices that would stretch their repertoires as language users. Especially helpful, in this respect, was the list of graduate outcomes formulated in *Preparing a Profession: Report of the National Standards and Guidelines for Initial Teacher Education Project* (popularly known as the Adey Report) (1998), which draws a distinction between what graduates should 'know and understand' about literacy, and the 'high levels of competence in literacy and linguistic awareness' they should develop. The latter category includes a capacity to 'appreciate the ways in which their own understanding of language, literacy and related pedagogy is enhanced through ongoing critical reflection, research and experimentation' (Adey, 1998, pp.13-14), which we used to justify a requirement that students write in a diverse range of genres in order to satisfactorily complete the subject. Rather than asking them to write only traditional academic essays which demonstrated their understanding of the issues with which this subject was concerned, we invited them to interrogate their own experiences of literacy by writing stories about their early 'literacy events' (Heath, 1982) and to experiment with different ways to present a case for addressing the literacy needs of students by writing (say) a speech to a School Council or a feature article for a newspaper. To conclude the subject, they were then required to write an essay in which they synthesised key readings and developed a perspective on the issues with which we were concerned.

'Language and Literacy in Secondary Schools' is a third year subject, and by this stage in their tertiary education students have had a range of experiences of academic writing, as well as plenty of stories to tell about their experiences of secondary schooling and the language and literacy practices of the communities to which they belong. The challenge to write a 'bedtime story' about the 'literacy events' of their early childhood (Heath, 1987) constitutes a significant challenge for them, habituated as they are to writing in the accepted genres of their respective disciplines. Most of them have not written stories since they were in secondary school. This very act of dislodgement from their habitual practices as writers stimulates reflection about the demands they make on secondary school students when they request them to use genres with which they might not be familiar (e.g. the ubiquitous science 'report'). The prompt for writing about their early 'literacy events' is Shirley Brice Heath's essay, 'What No Bedtime Story Means', and to wrap up this first piece of work they are required to reflect on how their own experiences of literacy might contrast with the literacy experiences of the communities which Heath describes. This is more than a simple exercise in categorising their own experiences as typically Maintown, Trackton or Roadville (a problematical exercise in any case), but an attempt to understand how literacy practices were part of the patterns of socialisation and language they experienced as children, shaping their identities and their engagement with schooling. A sense of the range of responses this exercise has elicited can be gleaned from some of the opening sentences of their stories (see Figure 1).

Fig. 1

‘It was all about the sound. The sounds from childhood are the most prominent my memory – listening to my mother read, dad singing and playing the piano, reading along to books on tape and record, singing along to Beatles records’

Mark Rushall

‘I grew up in a very typical Australian farming family. My parents worked long hard days on our land and received little rewards in the early years of their marriage and after I was born. I think that this, as well as their own schooling and family upbringing, contributed to their extremely strong, positive views of the value of education ...’

Robyn Green

‘Last month I has the opportunity to revisit the culturally diverse area in which I grew up. Papua New Guinea was my home in the first 18 months of my life. Living with my parents who were missionaries had a dramatic effect on the literacy events of my childhood ...’

Mark Lawson

‘I was born in Shimonoseki, a port city on the bottom tip of Honshu in Japan. Many vessels had anchored in the port to celebrate the debut of a newly built ship on that day... As a young child I enjoyed watching and mimicking my mother write. My elder sister and I sat together with my mother who often wrote letters to her friends in Tokyo, miles away from where we were. The way my mother wrote with her fountain pen on delicate writing paper with vertical lines fascinated us and we pretended that we were also proficient writers by drawing lengthy curvy snakes on our writing books...’

Yoko Kurosawa

‘Wedged between his two eager grandparents, my 18th month old nephew sits on the couch in his favourite truck pajamas, transfixed. Book after book. World after world. Everything is new and exciting. Suddenly, at the turn of the page, his eyes light up and a squeal of delight is heard all through the house. “Doddy! Doddy!” he says, pointing to the picture in front of him. A round of applause. “That’s right!” exclaim Grandma and Grandpa in proud unison. “Clever boy! It’s a doggy, just like our Daisy. And what does the doggy say?” A short pause. Bated breath. “Oif! Oif!” More applause...’

Virginia Donaldson

‘Scenario One. “Next!” The young girl walked into the room and perched herself up on the bed, ready for the evening reading ritual. Her sister passed her on her way out of the room, grinning proudly. Whoaaa, she must have got through a lot of cards, thought Anna; I better put in an extra special effort for Dad tonight. Now is the moment when Anna sense that the father is beginning “teaching mod” – some serious learning is about to take place. Forget the jokes, silly fart noise and play fighting. Attention, concentration and respect are now required. The father holds up a big red flash card with the black letters marked “C A T”.

Anna Grundy

These students are in their third year of a university course, and so they have all experienced ‘success’ of a kind that is not readily available to members of communities like Roadville or Trackton (although some of them do indeed have interesting stories to tell about growing up in working class communities or learning English as a second language). The point of the exercise is not for students who have never experienced Roadville or Trackton to undergo some kind of middle class guilt about their Maintown upbringing. By writing such stories, students succeed in making their own early literacy experiences strange to themselves in the best ethnographic manner. Virginia, for example, was able to conclude her narrative by reflecting: ‘The literacy events that I have described, along with the general environment in which I grew up, had a major impact on the way I learnt and also on my attitude and approach to literacy at school. As I have tried to illustrate in the narrative, family played a significant part in my home learning...’ Anna writes ‘The above literacy scenarios illustrate a variety of childhood reading practices which were crucial in preparing me for school literacy practices. The mere fact that both my parents were teachers meant that they both aimed to teach me the literacy practices which would ensure that I would understand literacy learning procedures in formal education systems...’ It is not as though they have now hit on the ‘truth’ of their early literacy experiences (Anna concludes her reflections by reminding her readers that ‘these fragments of memory are a reconstructed account of her memories from early childhood’). The quality of the generalisations that these students make on the basis of their stories shows that they have begun to see their early literacy experiences differently. They also benefit from making a transition from the specific details that characterise storytelling to the level of generality that is a feature of more analytical writing. When writing their narratives, they are encouraged to think carefully about the point of view from which their story might be told, and the extent to which they might thereby achieve a critical perspective on their early literacy experiences. They are then invited to engage in more general reflections, using language that is more akin to analytical writing.

Our purpose in rehearsing these aspects of ‘Language and Literacy in Secondary School’, however, is not to tell a heroic tale about our success in cultivating an understanding of the complexities of language and literacy in our students. As Swidler points out, teachers often make themselves the heroes of their own adventures – a justifiable way of gaining a perspective on the complexities of their professional practice and affirming the possibility of agency (Swidler, 2003). But while it seems fair to say that our students do indeed move beyond fairly traditional notions of literacy to a more complex understanding of the ways in which literacy practices shape their lives and the lives of their own future students, we wish to highlight problematical aspects revealed by their engagement in the demands posed by this subject.

For their concluding essay, they are required to articulate what they have learnt by doing this subject – a request which most of them are canny enough to know does not invite a negative response. By this stage in the unit, they have not only read Heath, but also familiarised themselves with Halliday’s ‘Relevant Models of Language’ (1973) and Gee’s ‘What is Literacy’ (1991), not to mention other articles. They are then required to draw on this material to reconsider their work as secondary teachers. How will they

address the language and literacy needs of the students in their own classes? What have they learnt about those needs? The quality of the learning they experience in the course of doing this subject can be gauged from the excerpts from essays in Figure 2.

Fig. 2

‘As Shirley Brice Heath says ... there is no universal way that children become literate, and I believe that teachers need to realise this and to adapt their teaching practice to suit the experiences of different students....’

Marion Northcott

‘Literacy involves much more than learning to read and write. Through this subject I have been exposed to various theories and explanations of what literacy is and how this affects children today. Shirley Brice Heath presents an insightful account of how different communities have different forms of literacy learning during their children’s early development. James Paul Gee looks at literacy from a different angle in his article as he develops the idea of gaining literacy skills in different ways, i.e. through acquisition or learning ...’

Elizabeth Seymour

‘Communication should include not exclude. This may demand a huge pedagogical overhaul on the part of the teacher. Just because I own a primary discourse similar to the “Maintown” experience, in that my childhood was very book-oriented, does not mean that I should expect my students to take meaning from their environment and to communication in the way I do...’

Tanya Borka

‘... the schools I have attended, either as a student or as a student teacher, have differed remarkably in terms of their discourses. In fact, a different “costume and instructions on how to act and talk so as to take on a particular role that others will recognise” has been required for me to “fit in” and feel “at home”... I worry that teachers enter schools with pre-conceived ideas about how a school will operate, how language will be used and in what context. I certainly did, and it was a rude awakening for me to have to change my dress, to change my language and act in a manner to which members of that particular discourse could relate ..’

Mary O’Donnell

‘Just imagine you are sitting in a classroom on the opposite end of the world. The teachers and students are speaking in a language totally unfamiliar to the one that you have spoken all your life. They are discussing concepts and ideas which are hard enough to understand in your own language, but in a foreign language it becomes almost impossible to grasp ...’

Margaret Gray

Yet although these reflections show that our students have been on a worthwhile intellectual journey, it is not as though this journey has been without its false turns and byways, or that by the end of the semester their destination is in sight. To draw on Peter Freebody’s description of conflicting discourses in literacy education, their journey might be described as a move beyond a common sense view of literacy as simply an ‘isolable aspect of human performance’ to an understanding of literacy as ‘an open-ended variety

of capabilities embedded in a range of purposeful social practices' (Freebody, 1997, p.10). Nearly all our students describe themselves as embracing more sophisticated understandings of literacy than those they formerly held. And they often become very critical of the way literacy is constructed by the mass media, including populist rhetoric about declining standards. However, this new 'discourse' (Freebody, 1997) combines with other ways of speaking about language and education that they have brought from other places. It is not uncommon, for example to find a student arguing the need to affirm the culturally embedded nature of literacy and then extolling the virtues of Bloom's taxonomy or Gardner's Multiple Intelligences. 'If students like those in Trackton', writes one student, 'are presented with a school curriculum that focuses on Verbal Linguistic or Logical Mathematical Intelligences, their ability to engage in the material will be limited.' In one breath they embrace the role that language plays in learning and human relationships (a la Vygotsky, Halliday, Barnes) and then commend versions of 'intelligence' that are narrowly psychologistic and bereft of any sense of social context. They can affirm the complexities of language and literacy, and then write glowing reports about primary schools that are 'innoculating' (Freebody, 1997, Luke and Luke, 2002) their students against illiteracy by implementing literacy intervention programs. They are especially impressed by routinised literacy programs like Early Years in Victoria, which succeeds in improving the literacy performances of students while avoiding the issue of their life long engagement with literacy.

We are not suggesting that such comments completely deconstruct our 'success' story. What they suggest is that the journey on which these students have embarked is itself far more complex than a traditional understanding of a liberal education within the context of a tertiary institution.

What Is Literacy?

The contradictory nature of the students' learning reflects a clash of discourses that shapes our own pedagogy, as well as the research literature on which we draw in this subject. It is not as though anyone can simply stand outside these discourses, rejecting one and embracing the other. Rather, we are confronted by the necessity of struggling beyond a binary opposition between individualistic, psychologistic notions of literacy and a larger concept of literacy that is grounded in our social practices (Freebody, 1997, p.10). Such a move is bound to be tentative, even clumsy. Although we may criticize the individualistic focus of 'outcomes' ideology and the narrowly functional notion of literacy that it promotes, it is hard to think differently, and to conceptualise our lives in other terms. We can illustrate this difficulty by pointing to some interesting tensions within the essay by James Gee that we use in this subject, namely 'What is Literacy?' (Gee, 1991). The essay is a very generative one, but our students' reactions to it have sensitized us to problematical aspects of Gee's own attempts to formulate an alternative to traditional understandings of literacy.

Gee's essay provides a useful vehicle for discussing with students some of the types of argumentation employed by academic writers. Gee's key strategy is to pose the word 'literacy', conjuring up common sensical notions of its meaning, and then to challenge those notions by situating 'literacy' within a new analytical framework. He thereby offers

a definition of 'literacy' that is counterintuitive, the very stuff of academic argument. Our students always enjoy reflecting on the way he manages to problematise common sense notions of literacy by conceptualising literacy as a function of 'discourse'. We use class time to reflect on the structure of Gee's essay, and the way he provocatively interrogates common sense meanings of words like 'literacy' and 'learning'.

The essay is a challenging one for students, and as teachers we feel pleased when they begin to use the word 'discourse' in their classroom discussions. We can sense that they are trying the word out, listening to how it sounds as they speak it. Their engagement with Gee's argument marks a significant step on their part beyond common sense notions of literacy and their roles as teachers in delivering the 'outcomes' that systems specify. Their own experiences of social networks also give them a point of access into Gee's essay, and they find it useful to reflect on the range of languages they speak in a variety of situations. Gee defines 'discourse' as 'a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or "social network"' (Gee, 1991, p.402). By and large, students manage to do some very productive work with this notion, especially with respect to differences between school literacy practices and the cultural practices and social networks in which students engage outside school. Yet Gee's essay is also worth analysing critically. Does Gee really transcend the contradiction he poses between psychologistic understandings of literacy, as something that is simply located inside an individual's head, and a more distributed notion of literacy as suggested by his understanding of 'discourse'?

Our students' continuing struggle with these conflicting discourses about literacy (Freebody, 1997) provides an interesting frame for rereading Gee's essay, alerting us to problematical aspects of his own argument. We are not suggesting that our students actually reach a point where they are able to construct such a reading of Gee's essay. To the contrary, they generally embrace his definition of 'discourse' as an identity kit, drawing useful links between his analysis and the way Heath differentiates between the literacy practices of Trackton, Roadville and Maintown. But although the notion that discourse is an 'identity key' which 'comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act and talk so as to take on a particular role that others will recognise' resonates with undergraduates - they are typically busy assuming a variety of roles, regularly changing their 'costumes' and their ways of talking and acting - it does not begin to capture how an individual's experiences are shaped by discourses. The idea of 'taking on' a discourse seems, after all, to be a special case in comparison with the challenge of grappling with the discourses in which we are located, in relation to which we have exercised no choice. The patterns of socialisation that we experience as children are never simply a matter of wearing an 'appropriate costume' or following 'instructions on how to act and talk', though we may well become conscious of dressing and acting in certain ways that distinguish us from others. However, such choices have been made for us, not by us (our early experience of language and discourse is not a matter of 'taking on' an identity, as though we are choosing from an array of goods in a supermarket). Even though we might eventually distance ourselves from the beliefs and practices of our childhood, there is a sense in which everything we experience continues to be shaped by

the world we knew as children. The languages we spoke as children echo in our memories, the traces of our early struggles to make connections between words and meaning, language and thought ('Down the passage which we did not take/Towards the door we never opened ...') (Eliot, 1968).

That Gee's understanding of discourse must ultimately be judged to be problematical is shown by the way he lists the following examples: 'being an American or a Russian, being a man or a woman, being a member of a certain socio-economic class, being a factory worker or a boardroom executive, being a doctor or a hospital patient, being a teacher, an administrator, or student, being a member of a sewing circle, a club, a street gang, a lunchtime social gathering, or a regular at a watering hole' (p.4). How can being a member of a sewing club be meaningfully compared with belonging to a social class? Sewing clubs may well be typical of membership of a certain strata of society, and in that sense a decision to join a sewing club may be socially determined in much the same way as membership of a certain social class. But Gee is not finally attempting to conceive of this array of social practices in connection with one another, as a function of a complex set of structures and relationships. In this respect, it is telling that he puts emphasis on 'being' an American, on 'being' a man or a woman, on 'being' a teacher or administrator, occluding any sense of our struggle to become the things we think we are, as we immerse ourselves in our day to day lives and the complex networks of social relationships around us.

The logical flaw in Gee's analysis is akin to what Marx characterised as the mode of analysis of 'the eighteenth-century Robinsonades' (Marx, 1973, p. 83). Marx's decisive methodological break from eighteenth-century economic analyses was to posit material production and the complex network of social relationships in which individuals operate in order to reproduce society and themselves as the unit of analysis, rather than supposing that 'individuals' 'naturally' came together to establish society for their mutual benefit: 'The more deeply we go back into history, the more does the individual, and hence also the producing individual, appear as dependent, as belonging to a greater whole... Only in the eighteenth-century, in "civil society", do the various forms of social connectedness confront the individual as a mere means towards his private purposes, as external necessity. But the epoch which produces this standpoint, that of the isolated individual, is also precisely that of the hitherto most developed social ... relations' (p.4). Gee's standpoint remains that of the isolated individual, for whom the 'social connectedness' of 'discourse' is essentially conceived as an external phenomenon, not something in which the individual is embedded, of which individuality is itself a function. Despite his affirmation of the ubiquitous nature of 'discourse', he ultimately fails to grapple with the paradox posed by Marx, that the standpoint of the individual is actually 'produced' by the most developed form of social relationships that have hitherto existed.

Gee's failure to transcend the standpoint of the individual means that he continues to treat social phenomena like language and 'discourse' as essentially external to the individual. This produces what Marx would call 'unmediated' concepts (his distinction between 'Discourse' and 'discourse', between 'acquisition' and 'learning') that fail to do justice to the complex determinants of social phenomena (what Marx calls the 'concrete') (Marx,

1973, cf. Lukács, 1971, p.10). The logic of his analysis produces a familiar scenario of equipping individuals from certain discourse communities with the skills to access the dominant discourse. Rather than challenging the dominant discourse as it is enacted by school literacy practices, and affirming the rich complexities of the literacy practices and communication networks in which students engage outside school, Gee ultimately affirms the hegemony of the liberal humanistic paradigm in which he operates. Students who have not ‘acquired’ the dominant forms of literacy appear to be destined for remediation programs that might allow them to speak the language of their superiors more fluently. We need far more sophisticated analytical tools than Gee’s (essentialist) definition of ‘discourse’ to capture the ways in which individuals actually experience the interface between their literacy practices of their communities or social networks and the mandated literacy practices of schools.

Managerialism and Professional Learning

Students’ responses to the texts used in this unit and their reflection on what they have learnt signal the conflictual nature of exploring a critical pedagogy within a managerial climate of teacher education. In our attempt to re-mediate their understanding of literacy as social practice and its implications for schooling, we became aware that pursuing ‘literacies’ and ‘discourses’ in the plural form does not finally resolve the problem of how to surmount traditional understandings of literacy education because our students continue to be positioned as the recipients of a certain type of professional knowledge and training (VIT, 2003). This discourse about the teacher as the professional precedes the activity of professional learning and, hence, the act of speaking or writing about professional duties and roles. Among the metanarratives of professionalism, we found the current discourse of ‘managerial professionalism’ particularly powerful in determining the subject-positions of our students.

The discourse of ‘managerial professionalism’ is now entrenched in teacher education to the point at which students’ professional learning is totalized by the influence of neo-liberal outcomes ideology (Sachs, 2001). The idea of universalistic standards is written into the very definition of ‘the teacher’ as the professional who delivers education, regardless of the characteristics of the client (i.e. learners). In this ‘service delivery’ model (Turner, 1993), the needs of learners are often trivialized as the development of certain competencies and skills (Benesch, 2001). This sanctions, amongst other things, a professional culture of universalistic standards in ‘delivering’ literacy skills. As a consequence, our students are also expected to demonstrate a set of skills spelt out by policy-makers with regard to graduates from Education Faculties. Clearly, the discourse of professional managerialism interpellates students’ professional learning, positioning them as providers of decontextualised literacy skills (Street, 1993). It also promotes a certain model of pedagogy and a certain version of the relationships between teachers and learners in classroom settings. Their own skills as graduates are enumerated in a decontextualised way and this translates into a pedagogy which is essentially the transmission of literacy skills conceived in a narrowly psychologistic manner.

A socially critical perspective on literacy, learning and emerging professional identities of student teachers was deployed in this unit as a counter-discourse to managerial

professionalism. This strategy was not used for the sake of rescuing our students from the iron cage of governmentality and economic rationalism in education. Rather, this discourse was enacted to unsettle students' understandings of literacy and learning by exposing them to texts that have been centrally concerned with the social nature of literacy. By focusing on the uses of language and literacy for different social purposes and, therefore, on textual practices in schools as well as in the families and communities of secondary students, we endeavored to emphasize that literacy learning is inseparable from social and cultural activities in which they have participated. By organising language and literacy around experiences that are immediate to students, our strategic interest was to open up other subject-positions and possibilities in professional becoming. For instance, the concept of multiple textual practices has offered a possibility to deconstruct the unitary notion of literacy and learning and to criticize the reductive view of standards in professional learning. By drawing on situated literacy practices, we have tried to reach towards a more nuanced account of the identities and practices of beginning teachers, stressing the local and indeterminable nature of their own textual practices. However, exposure to the 'multiple' and 'local' appeared to be not particularly productive without addressing the discourse of managerial professionalism explicitly and, in particular, the ways in which it informs the organisation of teaching practice and shapes ideological contexts in which teachers (and therefore students) operate.

The discourse of managerial professionalism has shaped teaching culture and overall students' experiences to such an extent that a decontextualised and psychologistic view of literacy and learning has been difficult to escape. One reason for this is that the project of professionalisation dismisses the plural and endorses unification in the 'production' of qualified graduates. Knowledge and skills of students are therefore typified, staged and judged in the process of their training so that they could move progressively towards an imagined construct of 'the professional' – that is, one who demonstrates specialized knowledge and skills to make her/his own judgments and act with responsibility to ensure certain outcomes (Pels, 2000; Shore & Wright, 2000). With regard to literacy, for example, this means that graduates are expected to deal with literacy problems in the classroom in such a way that standardized criteria set for students' performance are met, contributing to the school's formal accountability processes. In such a context of teacher education, a decontextualised model of literacy becomes appealing as it claims to provide a relatively straightforward framework for the solution of literacy problems.

Furthermore, the overall assessment criterion of students' performance within the new discourse of managerialism in teacher education encourages them to approximate to the view of the professional as an autonomous agent who can analyze a situation effectively and formulate solutions in the process of 'critical' reflection. This kind of assessment practice is driven by the 'audit culture' of education systems and, as Shohamy (2001, p. 131) puts it, is "a product and agent of cultural, social, political, educational and ideological agendas" that shape lives of students and teachers.

However, there is another reason why the concept of plurality in Heath's and Gee's texts was often held by the students to imply a perspective unity in literacy education, which is a liberal solution to the problem of the multiple (e.g. multiliteracies, multiculturalism and multiple identities). In conditions of top-down language and cultural politics, teaching

‘common’ literacy which is based solely on middle-class values and textual practices is the only solution for social ills (Hirsch, 1987, 1999). This idea, inflated by policy-makers to the inescapable importance of unitary knowledge and literacy, drives current educational policies and is seen as ‘liberatory’ capital that helps people from the underclass and minority groups to rise economically. The multiple is seen as a problem in itself and, therefore, teaching literacy that incorporated multiple textual practices and funds of knowledge is conceived as threatening to fragment national culture and condemning disadvantaged minorities to illiteracy. This liberal ideology has informed students’ reading of texts or, at least, was implicit in their writing.

Furthermore, the drive to find a holistic resolution to multiple literacies may have originated from the texts themselves. Both Heath and Gee undermine the stable, unitary notion of literacy and, in doing so, they appeal to the ‘liberal self’ mobilised by a dilemma to ‘choose between two possible ways of defining an escape from political contingencies’ (Pels, 2000, p. 149). When criticizing holistic and psychologistic notions of literacy and learning as objective facts of contemporary schooling, the students appealed to a liberal (romantic) ethics of reforming this by recognising differences in literacy practices. At the same time, faced with the reality of managing these differences in classrooms to meet literacy standards and learning outcomes, many of them have reverted to utilitarian arguments about how literacy should be taught. In this sense, they were caught between the managerial discourse emphasising performance and accountability for reaching measurable outcomes, the liberal perspective on difference emphasising the hegemony of particular social and textual practices and the sociocultural perspective on literacy emphasising the ‘ecological’ coexistence of the multiple. Implicit in this struggle is the logic of liberal self, one that celebrates differences and, at the same time, rejects transformation of discourses by which those differences, differential privileges and unequal relations of power are produced (cf. Pennycook, 2001).

Towards a Transformative Model of Professional Learning

Recognising the contradictions and dilemmas that frame the identities of our students and rejecting the static view of their professional learning constructed within the managerial discourse of teacher education, we have initiated a research project. Our main goal in this project is to explicate the discursive dynamics around students’ conceptions of their professional identities with regard to literacy education by inviting them to reflect on the role of literacies in their lives and on communication networks in which they operate. We intend to chart the contradictory nature of their professional becoming that will keep tensions and movement in play, resisting the holistic succour of *the* professional defined in government statements. In so doing, our aim is not to set up yet another analytical/moral polarity between the views of what counts as professional learning. Rather, we seek to un-frame the curriculum in such a way that students’ diverse identities, textual practices and semiotic resources are recognized and their literacy experiences are not seen as deficient. ‘Un-framing’ in this project is understood as a deconstructive strategy that goes beyond the liberal celebration of difference and multiplicity in the classroom. By drawing on critical approaches to literacy, the idea is to provide semiotic tools that would encourage a commitment to reshape literacy education in the interests of marginalised groups of learners (Luke, 1997). In this regard, we hope

that this study will help us construct collectively a learning environment in which diverse textual resources would allow students and teachers to engage critically in the dialectic of 'discursive fields', addressing contradictions in professional learning and permitting to welcome different answers, rather than a single solution to the problems in literacy education. In this way, we aim to create different possibilities for becoming *a* professional, and especially ones that resist the increasingly universalist and reductionist accounts that seem to appeal to governments and educational institutions.

This project, therefore, will draw on a sociocultural approach to literacy learning and, in particular, on activity theory, which emphasises participation in different sociocultural activities as central in a social and dynamic understanding of learning. Because our students learn about teaching in a complex socio-semiotic environment - through a mixture of formal training, social experiences, reading materials, advice from teachers and the transference of ideas from their personal lives and biographies - we find this conception of learning particularly helpful in addressing uncertain and contested nature of professional becoming. In addition, activity theory offers a framework for a transformative pedagogical practice aimed at providing tools for the critical redesign of learning environments and challenging local and broader socio-political structures shaped by relations power.

In our research we draw on an understanding of learning as participation in social activity. This notion has been developed in activity theory to provide the possibility of social explanation of learning, namely in practices of different communities. From this perspective, learning is part of social engagement with others rather than a set of individual actions – that is, learning becomes distributed among people as they participate in a joint activity. To investigate how people learn in different social practices, Engeström (1987) proposes a unit of analysis that is defined as *activity system* – a social practice that includes the rules and norms, division of participation, and goals of the community. Furthermore, the relations between community members are mediated by a variety of semiotic resources that pattern their interpersonal communication and meaning making. This framework for activity allows researchers to focus on different elements of an activity system to understand its overall dynamics and patterns of social configuration, which involves the construction of social identities, knowledge, meanings and relations of power in the activity system.

We use activity theory to rethink and reevaluate how beginning teachers – as a community – come to learn new concepts about the role of language and literacy, how they conceive the distinct semiotic potential of different literacy practices as they occur and evolve in and outside traditional schooling and how they negotiate their knowledge and understanding with other participants in this activity. To distil these concerns into an overriding objective of this project, we are fundamentally concerned with the role of meaning and knowledge negotiation in the activity of professional learning. This activity is situated in a particular educational context (i.e. activity system) but is also constituted through the junction of different values, beliefs, discourses and other semiotic artifacts that interpenetrate the local activity of professional learning. We draw on Vygotsky's (1978) idea that cultural-semiotic artifacts mediate the consciousness and identities of

participants-in-activity. Focusing on discourses and texts that mediate professional learning, we aim to explicate how identities, meanings and professional knowledge are negotiated and what is involved in students' learning.

In this regard, the construction of consciousness and identity in congruence with social activity is hardly an unproblematic issue. The fact that activities are socially organised does not mean that they are democratically organised and controlled. Most activities are controlled by powerful groups of people through ideologies. Concerning this issue, Vygotsky (1997, p. 211) argues that:

The environment does not always affect man [sic] directly and straightforwardly, but also indirectly through his ideology. By ideology we will understand all the social stimuli [material-semiotic artifacts] that have been established in the course of historical development and have become hardened in the form of legal statutes, moral precepts, artistic tastes, and so on. These standards are permeated through and through with the class structure of the society that generated them and serve as the class organization of production. They are responsible for all of human behavior and in this sense we are justified in speaking of man's class behavior.

Even though understanding of how ideology works has somewhat changed since Vygotsky, to understand the work of the ideological in the construction of consciousness and identities of our students is one of the main foci of this study. As Engeström (1999) puts it, society is a 'multilayered network' of activity systems in which knowledge and power are not concentrated in a single location but flow through the capillaries of this network. What kind of discourses operate with regard to teacher education, as we have argued above, influences students' positions in the local activity of professional learning and their participation in oral and written work in this unit. For this reason, we put research emphasis on collaborative work and dialogical interaction to trigger the exchange of different perspectives and worldviews and, by the same token, the practice of discursive border-crossing. In this mode of learning the deployment of a variety of critical tools (texts) in meaning making will be crucial for the more active engagement of students in transformative learning, which goes beyond the current context of professional 'structuring' and into the field of broader sociocultural practices.

Conclusion

The dialogical mode of professional learning is not free from conflicts and uncertainties. We recognize that the discourses of professionalism and liberal ideology will fill our classrooms with authoritative perils of domination and subjection but also with possibilities for community, resistance and emancipatory change. A dialogical inquiry involves enunciation of one's own position and responsiveness to another person's view and another social position. In this contradictory and simultaneous process of self-other interaction, "if the individual is forced ... to make a choice, then that choice is not between meanings but between colliding social positions that are expressed and recognised through these meanings" (Leont'ev, 1978, p. 64).

By explicating these colliding positions and inviting students to reflect critically on their own perspectives on literacy education, we aim to challenge the systems of ideas that affect their identities, desires and dispositions. In other words, our aim is to investigate a new mode of professional learning as participation in a complex community of difference. At the same time, our project is not just about analysing its social implication for students' learning but also about its political consequences. By raising students' awareness of the textual worlds in which they live and their implications for literacy pedagogy as well as about discourses that shape their professional identities, we hope to open up an important aspect of becoming a literacy teacher – the one who would be able to engage collectively with her students in the critical disordering and reassembling of dominant knowledge and meanings, recognising sociocultural diversity in the classroom rather than ignoring or assimilating it.

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