

SIGNALS: THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN LITERACY, GENDER, AND
SEMIOTICS

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Interdisciplinary Studies
in the College of Undergraduate Studies
and in The Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Summer Term 2012

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine adult literacy beyond its constraints as a social problem and instead consider the implications of illiteracy as a particular form of lived experience, analogous to women's oppression at large. Through a complex system of meaning making, the knowledge accrued by illiterate adults is qualitatively different, and examining these differences in terms of their correlation to coping mechanisms developed in the face of social alienation and diminished professional prospects yields a greater understanding of class privilege and how nontraditional learners fit into a larger social structure. From the perspective of academic feminism, adult illiteracy presents several problems regarding the scope of an inclusive feminist community that acknowledges privilege and difference. The primary method through which information regarding feminism is conferred is printed materials, which utilize highly specific, specialized jargon, and unwittingly create an exclusive community marred by internalized racism and class stratifications. This study explores other methods through which feminist ideation might theoretically be possible, i.e. cultural "reading" communities and vocational and continuing education programs focused on cultural competencies, as women come out of their imposed silences and become aware of their circumstances in a way that resembles feminist thought, if perhaps without sophisticated language with which to communicate those ideals. In this way, feminist ideation and semiotics tie in together, as attitudinal change may occur without the semantic realization of what this entails. This goal of this

paper is also, in part, to justify why acknowledging gendered learning differences and a particular female subjectivity for adult literacy clients will yield better results for their self-valuation, as gender is a component of diversity all but ignored within the scheme of adult literacy pedagogical theory.

DEDICATION

For Shalonda, whose honesty initially sparked my interest in adult literacy.

For my parents, who acknowledged that I was overburdened and had the good sense to pay
for another semester, so that I could give this work the attention it deserves.

And for Michael, who endured many rants about this work, and without whom I would not
have had the strength to continue.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my unending gratitude towards my committee members, from whom I learned the value of personal accountability in the face of personal challenges and the threat and indeed, the confirmation, of deferred plans. Without the patience of my chair, Leandra Preston, and my outside committee member, Dr. Anthony Grajeda, I would not have anything to publish right now. UCF's Women's Studies department at large has been incredibly supportive of my work and patient as I grew as both a student and a person, and I am forever grateful.

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Chapter I: Introduction

When the light is green, you go

When the light is red, you stop

But what do you do when the light turns blue

With orange and lavender spots?

“Signals” by Shel Silverstein (20)

Background

I initially became interested in adult literacy and its relationship to feminist theory when I realized that my coworker could not read the book I gave her for her baby shower. The fact that her work responsibilities require a level of technical skill beyond my own illuminated the various types of literacies we rely on in day-to-day activities, especially regarding the second shift expected of women as mothers. I chose the book, *A Light in the Attic* by Shel Silverstein, which is rated by Scholastic suitable for children in third grade and beyond, because it was the book I remember bonding with my parents over most as a child, which had instilled a lifelong love of reading in me (Scholastic). This conflation of the ubiquitous use of reading and its more specifically domestic role struck me as especially meaningful. In my view, the experience of adult illiteracy acts a prism through which gendered experience can be understood. Questioning the veracity, or more directly, the

utility, of the claim that illiteracy is simply an easily understood social problem makes a deeper understanding of learning differences and the social stratifications they engender possible.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to apply a new disciplinary perspective to adult literacy. Though generally conceived of by most educators as a problem that cannot be rectified after the student is no longer legally bound by compulsory education requirements, this study questions the validity of the claim that change needs to happen from the illiterate person at all, or rather, if certain social structures should be reworked to better accommodate difference. This will be examined in Chapter Two, as the idea of il/literacy as lived experience is explored further.

From the perspective of gender studies, these gender differences manifest as a myriad of reasons for the illiterate adult to seek tutelage in Adult Basic Education programs, yet upon entering these programs, their learning styles are treated as identical, despite years of socialization that would support an argument to the contrary. I will return to this point in Chapter IV, when I discuss gendered learning differences and reasons that clients enter adult basic education programs. This study is, in part, a case for why gender differences are formative in creating thinkers and that the importance of acknowledging their differences cannot be overstated. There are certain ways of addressing these issues at the level of educational programs for literacy clients, most notably in discussing with prospective ABE/ESOL tutors the ways in which gender diversity manifests itself for

clients, and deeply informing their experiences.

Statement of the Problem

While I am using many lenses to contextualize this problem, the primary theoretical modalities through which I interpret literacy are feminist standpoint theory, critical pedagogy, cultural studies, and semiotics. Historically, many feminist theorists, especially second-wave academic feminists, depicted reading and writing almost as moral imperatives for the liberated woman. Though consciousness-raising groups were able to supplement feminist education with an alternative to print media, this particular method of feminist ideation has largely dissipated in light of social gains made by women in the wake of feminist mainstreaming. In the words of Sandra Harding, “standpoint theory is an organic theory that can arise around any oppressed group. It’s also a folk history” (3). In this way, standpoint theory is particularly apropos to use with adult literacy, as it allows women’s experience to be valued from exactly the positionality from which it is conveyed. Adult illiteracy is a problem that silences the individual. It is a roadblock to liberation, yet it does not necessarily mean that liberation is impossible. According to Hardy, women need “to understand the conceptual practices of power... through which their oppression was designed, maintained, and made to seem natural and desirable to everyone” (6). Standpoint theory contends that these roadblocks may be ameliorated through awareness of the individual’s position within a larger discourse of oppression.

From a feminist perspective, it is incredibly alienating to consider the written word to be the only method through which a woman can self-actualize and become aware of her

own oppression. Feminist theorists, while the notable exception of some self-identified women of color, rarely acknowledge literacy as a serious issue still dividing women, especially across class-based lines. The acknowledgement given generally correlates with their woman forebears, and in the process, paints the illiterate woman as a specter of a bygone era, someone with whom we no longer need to concern ourselves, at least in the Global North. If she is acknowledged, it is generally from a purely sociological or ethnographic perspective, so the backing of theory is severely lacking, and generally allows the issue to be viewed as a social problem, rather than a particular, valuable form of lived experience, which is analogous to the oppression of women in general, and amplified when the two factors together create an intersectional double bind.

Viewing the material world as something that can be navigated in one particular manner is both assumptive and dangerous. Doing so ignores the privileges—class-based and educational—that allow for unencumbered socialization. Taking for granted that symbolic negotiation is equal to and necessarily coupled with linguistic understanding and interpretation assumes that all people are capable of both modes of interpretative praxis, which is inherently marginalizing, and allows an erasing silence among a minority subset of men and women to be perpetuated ad infinitum. Above all else, there is a need for difference to be acknowledged not as a weakness in the development of feminist inquiry and thought, but rather, as a strength and an opportunity for a different voice to be factored in to the ongoing project of pinning down what “women’s experience” means.

Research Questions

Does gender play a role in illiteracy as lived experience? If so, how? Do women learn differently than men, and if so, how? Are these needs met within the scheme of literacy pedagogy? How does illiteracy work as a metaphor analogous to women's experience at large? How can a semiotic understanding of visual or textual literacy be a jumping off point for the emancipation of women from social constraints?

Limitations

1. I did not have access to any intake records when I worked at the Adult Literacy League in Orlando as I had initially anticipated, due to strict privacy guidelines and clearances.
2. I decided to cut the initial interview portion for practical purposes, and in the process, any observations made in speaking informally to literacy clients became inadmissible.
3. Some of the proposed research questions became irrelevant, as the study was no longer an ethnography as initially proposed.

Definitions

Critical pedagogy:

Defined by Ira Shor, as "habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to

understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse” (129). For the sake of this paper, “critical pedagogy” is a theoretical modality, which acknowledges the explicit value of reciprocity in a teacher/student relationship, and deconstructs its inherently hierarchical nature.

“**Academic feminism**” and “**print feminism**” are sometimes used interchangeably to denote feminist theories that are written in jargon that is very specific to interdisciplinary approaches to women’s issues. These are usually confined to the humanities, with a particular emphasis on Gender and Women’s Studies.

Consciousness-raising: Group-based discussions, intended to illuminate shared threads in women’s lived experience and combat the isolation caused by the silence surrounding many matters pertaining to sexism, racism, classism, and other systems of oppression.

Chapter II: Literacy

“To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.”

–Teaching to Transgress by bell hooks (13)

Introduction

Education follows a very particular linear pattern within the popular consciousness. Between the ages of two and six, we learn letters, their sounds, and begin to learn to read. By the age of ten, most children can read chapter books without assistance. By the time one graduates from college, their vocabulary will have grown from five thousand words in their native language at the age of five, to at least twenty thousand (Nation and Waring). Adult illiteracy transgresses artificially constructed boundaries of where education begins and ends. In doing so, it represents a unique opportunity for feminist inquiry, a liminal space between what a hegemonic discourse would consider functional and dysfunctional adulthood.

The National Center for Educational Statistics, which I will refer to as the NCES, identifies the following as a task-based model for textual literacy: “Literacy is the ability to use printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential” (White 3). The phrasing of this statement is deliberate. Literacy should be a democratizing tool, a right, but not an obligation,

particularly for adults, and in theory, it is just that. However, in practice, literacy is considered an issue of integrating an individual into a standardized whole for the good of their normative development, as well as the most rudimentary barometer of intellect and competence. Through social conditioning and the cultural erasure of persons with differing literacy abilities, adulthood is now necessarily conflated with advanced literacy, even though the assumed ubiquity of those skills is not reflected by statistical data. As a demonstrative example of this phenomenon, the general apathy or blindness of the educational community towards this problem can be found on the UCF website for the new Morgridge International Reading Center, which makes no mention of ABE or ESOL learners (MIRC). This program is specifically targeted towards promoting prose literacy, and in the “adults” subheading of UCF’s 2012 Summer Reading Programs for Children and Adults, the only skill acquisition programs for adults mentioned target “speed reading and study strategies” (Institute of Reading Development).

In practical terms, it makes sense that those who write traditional adult literacy curricula focus on task-based models, emphasizing the execution of everyday tasks that will vastly improve the daily goings-on of clients’ lives. For example, when I was sitting in on classes at the Adult Literacy League, half of one session of the ABE-1 class (Levels 0-4) was spent learning about writing a check, a task that in itself encompasses many goals of the ABE curriculum (learning to write numbers in numerals and in words, writing out a date, etc.). This is an imperative life skill and fits perfectly with the expressed goal of offering practical, adult-oriented skills in a manner that will not condescend, given the level

of life experience the client already undoubtedly possesses.

The National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), published by the NCES, breaks what I will refer to as “textual literacy” into two parts: “prose literacy” and “document literacy,” with the former referring to reading comprehension for “continuous texts,” such as “editorials [...] [or] brochures,” and the latter referencing “non-continuous texts,” like “job applications [...] [or] payroll forms” (NCES). Again, this reads literacy as a practical skill for navigating the world in discrete, separate tasks.

Illiteracy as a Social Ill

Literacy is constructed as a compulsory component of and requirement for successful adulthood. Statistically, this is in some ways true. In a study published by the National Center for Education Statistics titled “Literacy Behind Prison Walls,” researchers communicate that far from an individual, isolated issue that may inhibit future successes, illiteracy is an institutional problem that sends ripples throughout the whole of a community. They write:

[Throughout] our nation’s history, there have been periods when the literacy skills of the population were judged inadequate. Yet, the nature of these concerns has changed radically over time. In the past, the lack of ability to read and use printed materials was seen primarily as an individual problem, with implications for a person’s job opportunities, educational goals, sense of fulfillment, and participation in society. (NCES)

In contrast, it is now seen as a national problem that emphasizes social and economic cost over those aforementioned micro-level concerns. In this way, this established line of reasoning for approaching illiteracy as a social problem is detrimental to the individual. While the personal challenges of being illiterate are certainly considered in the process of explicating why literacy is vital to a healthy society, these macro-level issues that concern the cost to the whole are considered much more pertinent, and the more subtle issue of individual oppression and alienation are certainly secondary. Crime is not a focus of this paper, yet it is vital to recognize its role in constructing the issue of illiteracy as fundamentally harmful at the macro level. As Chizu Soto notes in her essay, "Rethinking Adult Literacy: An Analysis Through a Third World Feminist Perspective," with traditional approaches to adult literacy training, in this case internationally, though it also applies at the domestic level, "participants, increasingly women, are represented as the best means to achieve ends that are identified by somebody else," in this case a productive whole society (74).

In reference to the prison statistics, it is my assertion that the institution has too heavily emphasized the correlation between literacy and class issues that may lead a person to nefarious pursuits to get by, without taking into account that if concessions were made for the myriad valuable differences that illiteracy can engender in terms of forming resourceful thinkers, these vocational constraints would not exist at all. While prisons and crime are not an aspect of the macro-level issues that I am currently examining, because illiteracy often engenders diminished vocational prospects, the drive towards criminal pursuits is an unfortunate affect that must be considered, especially given that that issue

could be alleviated in some ways through vocational education programs, as well as the acknowledgement of vocational competencies, regardless of the proof on paper, which has unfortunately become a compulsory requirement in the increasingly competitive job market.

Literacy: Power and Liberation

In Western society, according to Pat Campbell, in her essay “Women and Literacy: An Emerging Discourse,” literacy is only viewed as a problem insofar as it threatens the economic sphere (Campbell 3). According to Paulo Freire, literacy is not considered a fundamental human right that one should be able to access at will, but rather, its absence is deemed a plague needing to be “eradicated” for the sake of the common good (7). In the process of creating a hierarchy wherein only textual literacy is read as a skillset that is socially useful, other so-called “low-skill” jobs are devalued by default, reifying the connection between poverty and deficits in intelligence. Though entering literacy programs is completely voluntary, and these programs will not accept students that seem to be seeking tutelage at the behest of loved ones, the typical stressors of everyday life for the illiterate adult create a climate of pressure for the person to simply survive, not to thrive or liberate him or herself. The issue is that the “illiteracy as social problem” model is intensely problematic and counterintuitive to, as bell hooks put it while appropriating a Foucauldian concept, education as a practice of freedom; that is, that education should be a liberatory force, not a compulsory aspect of survival. As Freire points out:

Critically speaking, illiteracy is neither an “ulcer” nor a “poison herb” to be eradicated, nor a “disease.” Illiteracy is one of the concrete expressions of an unjust social reality. Illiteracy is not a strictly linguistic or exclusively pedagogical or methodological problem. It is political, as is the very literacy through which we try to overcome illiteracy. Dwelling naively or astutely on intelligence does not affect in the least the intrinsic politics. (10)

Without the ability to meaningfully reflect on the power structures that shape one’s life, literacy is in no way democratizing, but rather only a way to appeal to the power structures that seek to alienate the person in the first place. In seeking to use prose literacy alone, not its implications for critical thinking, as the barometer for intellect, educators, prospective employers, and other authority figures miss the opportunity to see illiterate adults for the highly adaptive individuals they are.

As a demonstrative example of the power to thrive in the face of adversity, in 2003, a study called “Literacy in Everyday Life” conducted by the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) found that about half of the adults with “below basic” prose and document literacy skills report voting in the 2000 Presidential Election, as opposed to eighty-four percent of adults with “proficient” skills (NAAL). Some of the findings are also as follows:

Lower percentages of adults with *Below Basic* prose and document literacy than other adults reported reading any information about current events, public affairs, and the government in newspapers, magazines, books, or brochures or on the Internet; they were also less likely to obtain information about these topics from

nonprint sources, including family members, friends, or coworkers and radio and television. (NAAL)

Though these findings are in some ways discouraging, as they represent a voluntary opting out of civic engagement on the part of some, or at least, a compromised interest in these issues, but they are in no way surprising. The ability to engage with the political process and see the role it plays in one's life is directly correlated with educational levels, and it is also a luxury not readily afforded to people who are far more concerned with scraping together their below living wage earnings. Yet rather than interpreting those statistics in terms of said obvious negative implications, I would prefer to focus on their converse implication. The voting process is notoriously misleading, even for proficient readers, as ballot initiatives are often written in language that does not reflect the goal of the initiative. According to the Ballot Initiative Strategy Center, as of 2009, Florida did not have a process to create a clear, impartial ballot title (8). Even in the face of a civic process that can be intellectually challenging for persons far more formally educated, half of the adults with limited relevant literacy skills were still engaging in the civic process, which runs contrary to the theory that illiterate adults are not productive, engaged citizens.

The issue Paulo Freire sees with directly conflating the ability to read with class ascendancy is that these discrete, task-based skills do not in themselves encourage critical thinking or the questioning of social roles. He writes in *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation*:

Consider ex-illiterates who were "trained" by reading texts (without, of course, analyzing what is involved in the social context) and who can read, even though they

do so mechanically. When looking for work or better jobs, they can't find them.

They, at least, understand the fallacy and impossibility of such a promise. (10)

It is wholly unproductive to assume that literacy can ameliorate systemic issues of sexism, racism, classism, and ableism, and in this way, adult illiteracy acts analogously to women's oppression at large, in that the finer points of its individual oppressions are ignored in favor of a problematic discourse that treats people with differing abilities as fundamentally deficient, while not acknowledging their capacity for becoming aware of their circumstances through critically analyzing inequalities, as will be further explored in the next chapter. Literacy is not possibility and power; it is the possibility of power, and without politicizing the individual, it means nothing.

Chapter III: Feminist Ideation

Introduction

Within the last half-century, social justice concerns have permeated throughout the humanities. As such, there has been an increasing drive within Cultural Studies to move away from its historically elitist roots of interpreting cultural capital and its acquisition to more inherently democratizing methods of accrument. Correspondingly, several theorists have turned their attention towards certain reading communities, such as soap operas and romance novel readers, which, in their view, represent mass consumption and its discontents, as well as the textual engagement inherent to reception. “Low” culture, in this view, is necessarily conflated with certain deficits in privilege, yet interpreting its reception acts as a method for understanding difference, and allows for the potential of closing certain socially situated gaps.

Feminist theory, by design, uses reading and writing as the primary modalities for promoting feminist ideation and fighting oppression. Academic language is a hegemonic discourse in and of itself, and depending on this modality for all feminist ideation repetitively, discursively produces a very exclusive community. While the integration of theory is not imperative to feminist work on the ground, it forms the backbone of academic feminism, closing off what is intended to be an inclusive community to a surprisingly large portion of the population. As of 2003, the National Assessment of Adult Literacy estimated that fourteen percent of the overall adult population had below basic prose literacy skills (NAAL – Demographics – Overall). Comparatively, the same study gathered that only

thirteen percent had a proficient prose literacy capacity. While my position as a university student causes me to find these statistics staggering, it is imperative to acknowledge that the conflation of high-level literacy skills with the norm erases the particular experiences of people with basic and intermediate-level prose literacy alike.

Historically, feminist thought, which is inevitably communicated through the written word, has identified the ability to write as one of the most important pieces to the puzzle of identifying, eschewing, and fighting the multiple oppressions inherent to women's lived experience. This philosophy was most notably popularized in Virginia Woolf's book, *A Room of One's Own*, with the particularly privileged caveat that writing may not occur without a separate space and disposable income for the development of her ideas in the face of patriarchal opposition. Comparably, in her groundbreaking essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa," Hélène Cixous speaks of the necessity that woman "must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (Cixous 875). Cixous believes that the burning inward desire for greater purpose and meaning that women experience is their drive for self-expression. Acknowledging the history of this argument about women's writing is inherent to its essential deconstruction. As bell hooks notes in the chapter of her book, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, titled "Educating Women: A Feminist Agenda," the assumption that written materials were the best way of conferring this knowledge in the first place, let alone in increasingly convoluted jargon, betrays the deeply-rooted class biases of the established feminist movement (109).

Given that my research is closely focused on illiteracy, these aforementioned traditional reading communities are, by nature, beyond the purview of the persons whom I would directly concern myself with studying. However, there are certainly communities that are analogous to reading communities in their ability to build self-valuation, provide technical skill-sets, encourage the acknowledgement of oppression, and/or possibly even facilitate some degree of feminist ideation through people engaging in interpersonal group social relations, rather than an interchange of meaning between a person or persons and a text. These communities are my chief concern in this chapter. Furthermore, because I am interested in the origins of feminist ideation, preceding or in lieu of feminist theory, this chapter will address that as well, in order to form a hypothesis regarding the likelihood of feminist ideation in functionally illiterate populations.

Cultural Studies Approach to Reading Communities

To begin, a contextual definition for “reading communities” within the scope of Cultural Studies is imperative for its appropriation for less readily articulated purposes. In her book, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, Janice A. Radway takes a feminist approach in examining women who read romance novels and the communities they form therein. While never offering a definitive answer about the feminist value or shortcomings of the practice, Radway is quick to point out that “although romance reading and writing help to create a kind of female community, that community is nonetheless mediated by the distances that characterize mass production and the capitalist organization of storytelling” (212). The women involved “join forces only symbolically and

in a mediated way in the privacy of their individual homes and in the culturally devalued sphere of leisure activity” (212). The point Radway is making here hinges on the idea that romance reading is private by nature, something so culturally devalued, but also personal and private, that it does not elicit even a book club for interactions about the thoughts and feelings the texts engender. In contrast to one initial claim that romance reading can be functional in that it supplants the need for human affection and interaction by substitution, a rather common and frankly lazy interpretation of the purported psychology of mass consumption, if parroted without qualifiers, she also acknowledges the possibility that the very predictability of the structure becomes a mode of empowerment for the reader, in that the ostensible woman is able to “make sense of texts and human action” for herself and by herself (214).

Consequently, however, in relishing this predictability of structure that manifests itself as long taken for granted conceptions of sexuality, gender relations, and social norms, romance novels reinforce the same problematic social hierarchies and domestic expectations that Radway believes women hope to escape in seeking out the medium in the first place. Because she is reluctant to ever offer one definitive conclusion regarding the value or shortcomings of romance reading, it is quite difficult to discern if feminist ideation is even possible with such unorthodox source materials as a primary influence.

Similarly, in her essay, “Soap Opera and Utopia,” Christine Geraghty analyzes the soap opera form as a means for women to escape into a world without end, with each character only a component part of a community within the show’s universe (250-1). Like Radway’s concept of concurrent, but not necessarily directly overlapping, reading

communities, in Geraghty's view, the soap opera forms its own viewing communities as well. Further echoing Radway, Geraghty does not observe or imagine these communities as women gathering for this singular feminine ritual, but rather, that they will use the content of the shows as fodder for speculative conversations, which form homosocial bonds. In Geraghty's view, the utopian aspects of soap operas are derived from their dearth of scarcity, to use a tautology, creating a world of pure drama without systemic lack. Despite these excellent observations, Geraghty makes no specific mention of reception in terms of reification or dismantlement of gender roles, or the corresponding feminist ends that would include or address.

Adult Literacy and Reading Communities

When speaking about literacy, one is not simply speaking of the ability to read for pleasure or exercise basic qualitative math skills, especially when those definitions are linked with adulthood and its corresponding responsibilities. Literacy is altogether tied up in every social process adults partake in, and as such, it is intimately intertwined with class. For this reason, companies are often very concerned with the literacy of their employees, but this concern is derived primarily from the desire to optimize productivity, not to democratize the labor force through offering a purely elective mode of personal advancement. In light of this unavoidable fact, labor unions have formed communal literacy groups, which foster a sense of cooperation without judgment to make the process less about corporate devaluation and more about literacy as a human right and practice of freedom. In his essay, "Union Roles in Workplace Literacy," Stephen Michael Hensley

articulates the impetus for employer concern involving educational concerns in the following manner:

These "new" [skilled] workers must possess the intellectual and emotional flexibility necessary to adapt to changing situations, to understand what needs to be learned, and to learn it without disrupting performance. They must be able to cope with ambiguous situations, make good decisions quickly, and use their creative skills to solve workplace dilemmas. (National Adult Literacy Database)

These intelligences are emblematic of the highly adaptable illiterate adult, yet often in the course of standardizing the components of a "skilled worker," such competencies are largely ignored. Hensley further discusses seven components of a "worker-centered" educational process, as outlined by Anthony Sarmiento, noted labor union educator. In brief, these are "building on what the workers already know," "educating the 'whole' union member, rather than a narrow skill set needed to succeed in the workplace," "[involving] workers in... decision making," "equal program access," "adult oriented strategies," "confidentiality," and "broader integration of basic literacy management programs" (National Adult Literacy Database).

By creating a system through which unions may understand how to facilitate these learning programs, a learning community has been established for the perpetuation of social justice, influenced by a communal valuation of holistic education, rather than a solely workforce-oriented system, which treats laborers as profit-centered means, not independent, valuable human beings. One potentially problematic aspect of this otherwise promising example of a reading community is the possibility that its benefits may not be

equally conferred, simply because women are not equally represented in the workforce, or because their double-day impedes their ability to seek out such services.

Feminist Approach to “Reading” Communities

While important, labor communities only represent one possible perspective for literacy reading/learning communities, beyond the most traditional means of adult basic education programs. Throughout much feminist theory, particularly the writings of women of color, there are murmurings of learning communities that foster the ability for women to learn and understand their oppression, beyond the scope of academic writing. In the section of her book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, titled “Towards an Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology,” Patricia Hill Collins calls knowledge gleaned through first-hand experience “connected knowing” (Collins). Collins posits that “connected knowing” is especially common among women of color because “the ethic of caring” (that is, “the value placed on individual expressiveness, the appropriateness of emotions, and the capacity for empathy”) is closely tied to the African-American experience (Collins). According to Collins, connected knowing might also play a large role in the epistemological experience of working-class women at large, regardless of race, a postulation I thoroughly support.

With respect to feminist ideation, the logical conclusion to take the concept of connected knowing would state that first-hand experience with the factors of one’s own oppression would allow for its understanding and acknowledgement, beyond the purview of print feminism. More than that, it is possible that a community of connected knowing

may be formed through practices like oral history or genealogical processes, which do not necessarily assume prose literacy for the communication of historical oppression. One example of this is expressed by Alice Walker in her essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South," as she recounts searching for feminist role models, women of substance from whom she could draw strength, yet initially overlooked her own mother because she was poor and uneducated. In coming to terms with the vital role her mother played in shaping her creative spirit, Walker not only began to recover lost voices as a method of connected knowing, but also acknowledged her mother's artistic expression beyond the written word as equally valuable to feminine expression, what many feminists (Cixous, Woolf, and many more) consider the paramount manner of communicating feminine/feminist epistemologies. Walker writes:

And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read. And so it is, certainly, with my own mother. Unlike "Ma" Rainey's songs, which retained their creator's name even while blasting forth from Bessie Smith's mouth, no song or poem will bear my mother's name. Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories. [...] Something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories - like her life - must be recorded. (Ms. Magazine)

Here, Walker recounts her personal revelation of her mother's ability to intuit a craft and wordlessly communicate her experiences. Collins would consider these methods of creative expression part of the Afrocentric "ethic of care," as they are all dependent on emphatic

emotional conveyance. Walker's revelation is key to making the case for multiple intelligences or skills as an inherently feminist in nature; that is, that their acknowledgment will liberate individual women from the oppression of silence.

In her essay, "Sharing Ideas and Language with Illiterate Women: A Challenge for Print Feminism," Stephanie S. Miller identifies feminist literacy training, and by extension, feminist literacy tutors, as mediators between print works and illiterate women as new readers (Literacy Online). In stark contrast to the reading communities examined by Radway and Geraghty, there is a very direct, immediate interchange of ideas, when a feminist tutor speaks about women's experience as a matter of sameness rather than difference, to foster a new ideological framework for the client to understand and recontextualize the content of their life. In her essay, "Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression," bell hooks speaks of the need for feminism not to privilege any one group of women over another, and this requires that the tutor instill in the new reader the belief that their experiences are equally pertinent to the aims of the movement, and deserve some sort of creative articulation, if desired (26).

In assuming the role of feminist educator, however, the literacy tutor must be both cautious of boundaries and respectful of difference. Paulo Freire is quick to caution those who assume a teaching role from affirming the thoughtless reiteration of words as any indication that the material taught has made an impact on the person receiving said tutelage. In his book, *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation*, he identifies a Messiah complex inherent to a strict divide between teacher and student, wherein the teacher assumes an authoritarian role and the experiences of the student are dismissed as

secondary, if acknowledged at all (8). The internalization of their supposed “natural inferiority” causes, in Freire’s view, a lack of “structural perception”; that is, they cannot interpret the impact they have on the world around them (52). Feminist literacy teaching can combat that lack by allowing the student to situate themselves within the genealogies of their own oppression and not only understand that their learning challenges represent systemic inequalities, but also to begin to build up self-valuation through lessons in the value of true diversity, especially concerning experience.

In her book, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as a Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks speaks at length on the need for

When advocates of feminism first spoke about the desire for diverse participation in women’s movement, there was no discussion of language. It was simply assumed that standard English would remain the primary vehicle for the transmission of feminist thought. Now that the audience for feminist writing and speaking has become more diverse, it is evident that we must change conventional ways of thinking about language, creating spaces where diverse voices can speak in words other than English or in broken, vernacular speech. (173-4)

In this chapter on language, hooks stresses that in using academic language, we are appropriating the oppressor’s language to “turn it against itself” (175). Though this is important, and it represents so much of the important counter-hegemonic work that is being done in feminist communities and should in no way be trivialized, it is vital that others be able to articulate their experiences in their own words, whether that means through an oral tradition or through art or in their work. These are all revolutionary

feminist acts when done by women to empower women. A person seeking to improve their circumstances through adult literacy services is empowering him or herself, but likewise, a person who is finding ways to live in the margins is doing so as well through new language conventions and ways of challenging the expectations of their gender roles, even without conventional tools for doing so.

Conclusion

It is my conclusion that beliefs that would fit into a feminist paradigm may be spontaneously engendered without an academic feminist background, or even necessarily the knowledge that the views espoused could be labeled in any particular way, beyond that they are against individual human oppression. However, certain formal methods of feminist education may occur without the use of print media, as with consciousness-raising groups, or the verbal articulation of feminist aims and goals. Though not necessarily akin to the Cultural Studies reading communities examined in the second section, these “reading” communities interpret the interplay between oppression and gender, issues that everyone, but especially illiterate persons who generally face issues that are bound to class struggle, can relate to in the pursuit of a better world. Regardless of how these values are cultivated, they must be constantly reiterated and rearticulated, and there is no better way of doing that than simplifying the academic language used by the theorists for the purposes of efficient dissemination. In this way, the great irony of this paper is the reification of these insular feminist politics, while they are being dismantled in terms of their inability to adequately address these systemic issues. Yet while these are largely hypothetical

examples of the methodology through which feminist ideation is possible, acknowledging that feminist attitudes are not exclusive to academic or feminist-identified communities allows for the potential for women's experience to speak for itself as demonstrative of structural issues that need to be directly addressed.

Chapter IV: Meaning Making and Gender

"I'm so sorry if I'm alienating some of you

Your whole fucking culture alienates me."

– "White Boy" by Bikini Kill

Introduction

Semiotics with respect to literacy operates on multiple levels. In his book, *Semiotics: The Basics*, Daniel Chandler summarizes Charles Sanders Peirce's claim about the symbolic mode as the interpretation of symbols according to "a rule," or "a habitual connection" (38). Symbols, in this case, can be linguistic or quite literally visual, but regardless, according to Peirce, they generally adhere to a prescriptive meaning through which people can interpret the coherence of the thing itself, as well as its verbal signifier. In the chapter of his book, *Writing and Difference*, titled "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Jacques Derrida pioneered the use of semiotics for deconstructive purposes by expressing that "play" disrupted this "habitual connection," which he termed "presence," or more directly, the fixation of ideation (Derrida). "Play," in this context, is the production of a multiplicity of meaning, derived by all consumers of signs. Without the integration of a formalized structure of consuming linguistic signs (reading and writing), fixed ideas about the "correct" meaning of signs and signifiers ostensibly cannot exist, as meaning is constructed through a series of complex coping mechanisms singularly related to the

person themselves. Instead, visual signs and clues for meaning stand in for reading and interpreting the language itself.

For the illiterate adults, meaning-making, which ties in with the last chapter quite well with regard to feminist ideation, is especially relevant to the experiences of women, as they are subject to socially-imposed gender role expectations. Gender is constructed at a class level, and the dismantling of gender roles begins with formal education (read: textual literacy) and class ascendancy. A resounding theme in the overlap of gender and literacy is the reification of the gendered division of labor. Women acting as wage earners generally work part-time doing service industry or domestic work, and men gravitate towards manual labor. Without formal education, neither is guaranteed a great degree of job security. This is not without exception, but it is certainly a resounding pattern. Likewise, the challenges women face in the stratified domestic sphere directly inform their self-valuation. The meaning assigned to “woman” is increasingly reductive with the introduction of economic constraints. As Pat Campbell points out:

The sexual division of labor means that the pattern of women’s daily lives are organized and determined by external forces over which they have little or no control. For instance, women are overburdened with domestic tasks, and usually work a double day. Women are usually less mobile than men, particularly in developing countries, and when they are allowed to venture outside the private sphere of home, they are expected to maintain a posture of silence, which makes it difficult for them to sustain their literacy skills. Men’s control over women’s

sexuality often results in frequent childbearing, which prevents women from attending literacy classes. (9)

Given that women's roles determine so much about their compromised literacy in the first place, it is important to take into account when and why a person takes on the role of "student," possibly after a life of challenges with reading. Campbell further identifies our construction of literacy as being personally defined, as well as largely determined by privilege, and these opinions are created through a media-oriented othering process (Campbell 2-3). She further posits that in the media, literacy is only a concern for women if they are unable to adequately fulfill their roles in the private sphere (Campbell 3-4).

Women may seek tutelage, not just from centers that specialize in adult education but also from trusted friends, when they feel that their roles as mothers are compromised, as evidenced by the anecdote I offered earlier, along with innumerable others that cannot be included. For many women, literacy is a domestic responsibility to uphold the future of their children. While assuming the role of "mother" is for many women and empowering one, and should in no way be dismissed as the thoughtless reiteration of antiquated social patterns and kinship structures, it may also be the cause of unintentionally reified hegemonic power structures.

Women's Ways of Knowing

A central tenant of critical pedagogy is the obligation on the part on the student to question the knowledge they are being offered, rather than absorbing it simply on the

premise that the scholar in question knows better. For this reason, I find that Freire's characterization of the illiterate *man* to be very pertinent in discussing women's ways of knowing. In *The Cultural Politics of Education*, Freire dedicates an entire section of a chapter to the direct conflation of illiteracy as a gender problem by entitling that section "The Illiterate as the Marginal Man" (47). There is no corresponding, complementary "Marginal Woman." This section is dedicated to analyzing who is writing the discourse, which posits that illiterate persons are marginal to a cultural center, even when the statistics overrule this supposition. However, those statistics do not refer to illiterate men, but rather, illiterate *populations*, which certainly include women. In summary, illiterate women must choose between two nonexistences: complete cultural erasure even by the people who presume to speak for them, scholars who are, by nature, sympathetic to their plight, or forcible assimilation to fulfill a deep, abiding faith to a negativist construction of gender.

Similarly, in their book, *Woman's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, the authors outline several stages to women's ways of knowing, the most pertinent of which are that she begins in silence, then moves toward accepting the voices of outside authority in governing her actions. Literacy is read as a path to emancipation from the kind of "external authority" that engenders women's silence. In the first stage, words are seen as weapons to be used against them. Because illiteracy is conflated with a deficit in intellect, it is perfectly understandable that women feel disempowered in their use of language and prefer to be blindly follow authority. Likewise, literacy programs that are task-oriented amount to the "received knowledge" stage, if they do not also conclude with

an abstracted sense of self that is not dependent on these skills for validation. Echoing the reference to Patricia Hill Collins and connected knowing in the previous chapter, the ways in which women can instead become aware of their experiences lies with their awareness of their connected role and how they are part of a larger system of oppression, rather than entirely alone in their own experiences, as they might otherwise believe.

Women's Ways of Learning

The question of gendered learning differences directly correlates with the contemporary, third-wave feminist belief that because the educational paradigm supposedly discourages the active socialization of boys and girls into the narrowest of gender roles, the last vestiges of gendered learning differences have all but vanished. Not only does this ignore women's experiences, but it also disregards that many, if not most literacy clients are too old to have experienced this democratized era of public education. As expressed previously, illiterate women becoming literacy clients of their own volition may express a reaching out toward greater opportunities, either personally or professionally, but it might also reflect the deep social pressures they feel in the face of inadequacy as mothers, given that they are traditionally considered the shepherds of their children's education. A prime example of this is the pervasive encouragement for mothers to read to their children, with family literacy programs being some of the most effective ways of encouraging adult literacy. While these are highly effective strategies, I question if they represent women seeking services for the sake of bettering themselves, or rather, if they are the work of these aforementioned social constraints.

When examining my tutor training guide when I was working with the Adult Literacy League, the “Working with diverse learners” section identifies “learning styles, learning differences, and cultural diversity” as factors of a diverse learning environment. Though “race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, language, nationality, religion, etc.” are listed as factors of cultural diversity, these are not broken down further, beyond their most rudimentary implications, i.e. that an ESOL student might have a limited vocabulary in English, or that class is a likely factor for the student seeking tutelage. If anything, this section is intended to stress the importance of the tutor respect and cultural competency, and is not directly conflated with learning styles and learning differences, though they certainly do inform each other. In my view, these factors are so heavily imbricated that attempting to separate them from each other does a disservice to the client. We learn through the lens of our experiences, and finding ways to relate to students requires appealing to what matters to them, not just in practical terms, as with the aforementioned check-writing exercise, but also in terms of holding their attention through relatable examples and texts.

Acknowledging women’s ways of learning and the meaning they will apply to their social roles and the role literacy plays in their lives does not mean resorting to biological essentialism. Just as the role of the tutor is not to stereotype on the basis of race or ethnic background, creating certain gendered expectations for a literacy client is an ill-conceived method of recognizing the diversity of their experiences. Rather, listening for the ways in which their experiences reflect systemic issues of gender oppression and seeking to assist in their positive valuation of their woman-identified roles (wife, mother, domestic) yields

more meaningful discourse on the role of the political reality of illiteracy on their everyday lives.

As Freire stresses, and as hooks expounds upon when studying him, literacy is a political issue, and by nature, that means it is a gender issue, an issue that may be ameliorated through awareness of how it informs learning, and how those differences are not acknowledged by educators and authority figures. The learning styles of men and women are conflated as identical, which is wholly unproductive, given that characteristically gendered experiences shape these learning styles and differences. In my tutoring packet, “learning style” is identified as the standard “visual,” “auditory,” and “tactile/kinesthetic” breakdown, while learning differences are defined in the following ways:

- [Factors that] can affect how a person understands, remembers, and responds to new information
- May include difficulties in reading, listening, thinking, talking, writing, spelling, math, organization, or ability to focus
- Are part of a person’s make up that will not go away
- Are not the result of a lack of intelligence

While helpful, and certainly things that should be addressed, these factors miss the more intuitive differences that come from being debased, devalued, and disempowered through the ways in which literacy is read as a gender problem. As such, the overlap between these differences and their socially constructed identitarian roots must be more appropriately stressed, as the two are inextricable.

Illiteracy engenders a very particular kind of social alienation. Not only are the stories of illiterate adults, especially women, virtually erased from the record of our collective experiences, but they also must negotiate everyday life in a world which makes few, if any accommodations for their differences. They are told that any technical skills they have cannot get them employed without a piece of paper that demonstrates that competency. I spoke with a woman at the ALL who stated that she could build a house and take apart a car's engine, but that these skills are in no way marketable because she could not pass the basic reading tests to attend college. She spoke to me at length about being told by teachers that she was stupid, and how she became disillusioned the educational process, as she was passed through, only to finish school with very little to show for it. This is an all too typical story, and beyond that it represents the failures of the educational paradigm, it also demonstrates the particular competencies of the typical illiterate adult woman and the ways in which those skills are overlooked and devalued. Ways of learning are directly linked to these experiences, and without examining how they shape gender identity and everyday self-valuation, women cannot possibly begin to see their experiences as indication of larger patterns of oppression and begin to situate themselves within larger discourses of power.

Chapter V: Conclusion

Summary

Throughout this thesis, I assert that literacy is portrayed as a narrative of class ascendancy and compulsory civic engagement. Likewise, in feminist theory, it is considered the great equalizer between men and women, the first step in breaking down restrictive gender roles, either through social justice/feminist ideation, or the conferral of practical skills, which promote independent economic stability. The issue with treating literacy this way is that it does not deconstruct the ableism and classism inherent to believing that these tools are available to all people. It also cheapens the hard-won successes of illiterate adults, who often have to get around what one student calls in an example of the Adult Literacy League's assessment notes "the reading part [that] got in the way." To reiterate the findings of the chapter on feminist ideation, the acquisition of feminist attitudes is certainly possible through several methods of community-driven support of these developing attitudes.

Recommendations

Anecdotally, a resounding theme I found when speaking with literacy clients informally was their desire to be valued as intelligent and worthwhile individuals. They often expressed to me their impressive technical/vocational competencies, bilingualism, and ambition, yet knew that none of these things mattered to prospective employers if they could not prove it on paper, as with a Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) score to enter vocational programs, or a college degree. In my view, illiterate adults who are self-taught in

certain technical vocations should be offered ways to communicate these competencies that completely circumvent the need for formalized education and/or written tests. Obviously, this would be at the discretion of individual employers, but in my view, those technical competencies, such as mechanical and construction work, are often not far removed from straightforward manual labor, and offering different methods of communicating professional competencies would allow employees to maximize their earning potential without feeling pressured to thoughtlessly reiterate information they already know by reading manuals. This ties into the themes of coping mechanisms for illiterate adults, as the ability to learn through experience exemplifies the adaptability I continue to stress.

Beyond these vocational hopes that appreciate the illiterate adult's unique competencies, however, I find that the most important recommendation I can make is the need for politicization through critical engagement with one's circumstances. The sum total of my reading leads me to conclude that feminist ideation is possible, and only through that positive self-valuation can literacy mean anything for women. Learning to read cannot on its own propel a woman to seek out greater vocational opportunities or cast off the oppressive power relations that define her experiences, but attitudinal change can do so much more. This was certainly not the intention of this project initially, but it is a profoundly meaningful parallel to draw for my personal education in feminist pedagogical praxis.

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