"Say what they want to hear": Students' Perceptions of Writing in a Working-Class High School

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Abstract

The effects of neoliberal ideologies infiltrate all aspects of the teaching-learning environment, including academic practices of reading and writing. Writing, more than simply a demonstration of academic proficiency, represents a means of thinking – an opportunity to develop critical thought, build resistance to neoliberal individualism through collective action, and deepen one's sense of self-worth through self-expression. If writing is taught and experienced in accordance with the banking, or transmissionmodel of education, in which learners are taught to repeat facts deems important by authoritative forces, writing can contribute to schools as sites of social reproduction. Critical pedagogies that privilege the voices of youth, rather than excluding them on the basis of their incomplete stage of developoment (Deutsch, 2006), provide hope for creating resistance and building solidarity.

By focusing on student participants in a larger critical ethnography, this article highlights two themes that emerged from youth voices in the study. The first focuses on students' perceptions of writing in school, and the second centers on glimmers of resistance narrated by youth in relation to effects of neoliberalism.

Keywords*: youth, neoliberalism, suburban, critical pedagogy, high school*

Neoliberalism and public education

For decades, scholars have documented the effects of the current political climate on public education and the young people intended to be served by its system. Researchers have made connections between the deteriorating state of public education in the United States and an economic climate where inequities in income and wealth are increasing at an unprecedented rate, leaving those near the bottom struggling to survive. As politicians

authorize economic policies that favor the wealthy and powerful, government has reduced investment in public services (including education) that benefit the poor and working class. These conditions leave public schools in poor and working-class communities scrambling to provide adequate educational opportunities for already disadvantaged students.

Giroux (2003) describes how current political conditions, marked by a withdrawal of public commitment to justice, affect public schools and those who function within them.

> The first casualty is a language of social and political responsibility capable of defending those vital institutions that expand the rights, public goods, and services central to a meaningful democracy. This is especially true with respect to public schooling and the debate over the purposes of education, the role of teachers as critical intellectuals, the politics of the curriculum, and the centrality of pedagogy as a moral and political practice. (p. 74)

Giroux's words suggest a frame for the arguments that will be presented in this article. Federal legislation and its state level counterparts have had powerful effects on perceived educational purposes, pedagogical practices, and curricula. As the language of accountability and reform saturates public schools, students and teachers construct their identities, define what it means to teach and learn, and generate conceptions of literacy along these lines. Further, the importance of language, as a means of reproduction and/or resistance, is central to this study because writing is a concrete representation of discourse.

This article focuses on a particular slice of a much larger study – a study that explored how teachers and students in a predominantly white working-class first-ring suburban high school experience and articulate academic practices related to writing. Practices of literacy incorporate and (re)produce relations of power. The ethnographic study focused on structural and curricular factors that influence academic practices of writing, as well as the ways in which expressed and lived identities of faculty and youth influence, and are influenced by, these practices. State and federal reform initiatives currently reflect a strong emphasis on student writing, and standardized assessments in every discipline incorporate some form of writing. Since writing practices and policies are impacted by these changes, this study investigated how practices of writing in this school relate to social class(es) and discourses of empowerment and/or disempowerment among students and faculty.

This article addresses student experiences and narrations in depth, honing in on two particular questions:

- How do students in a predominantly white working-class first-ring suburban high school experience and articulate academic practices related to writing?
- What factors (structural, curricular, expressed and lived identities of faculty and youth) influence these practices? How do these practices relate to social class(es) and discourses of empowerment and/or disempowerment among students?

Writing, as a representation of language and thought, is an essential and visible aspect of identity. Therefore, it is critical to consider how writing is conceived and conveyed within the school and explore how writing has been affected by high-stakes assessments. Giroux (2003) contends that the "hidden curriculum," traditionally perceived as the cultural messages that are instilled by schools along with the content and skills that comprise the overt curriculum, has been appropriated by the discursive power of state examinations which now serve to define what it means to teach, to learn, to think, and to be eligible for upward mobility in the current society. In this milieu, it is important to understand how students construct their identities and negotiate their relationships, particularly with respect to teaching and learning to write.

Social class, schooling, and processes of exclusion

Mechanisms of exclusion, which serve to reinforce class stratification, exist throughout society, and neoliberalism perpetuates and exacerbates inequalities associated with stratification. Because schools mirror society, mechanisms of exclusion are prevalent in schools. These processes of exclusion in schools include differential aspirations and expectations, tracking, various forms of high-stakes testing, differential access to academic knowledge, and differential access to college counseling (Van Galen & Noblit, 2007). Weis (2004) asserts that categories of social identity such as class are socially constructed, fluid, and flexible; however, they "*become* 'real' inside institutional life, leading to dire political and economic consequences" (p. 13). Because schools are powerful social institutions, social class and schooling are mutually influential.

Moreover, Brantlinger notes that "social class has a major cultural significance in the construction of identity and, in turn, influences school relations in school and in community life" (p. 240). Factors that affect student access to various opportunities are both material and non-material. Students who attend schools that serve middle-class or upper-middle-class populations tend to have access to superior facilities as well as higher

expectations and expanded forms of academic knowledge. They are exposed to school personnel and classmates whose narrated aspirations include elite colleges and post-graduate plans. These students' experiences of schooling enable them to imagine for themselves a future which incorporates elements that will prepare them for their middle-class or upper-middle-class existences.

The converse is true as well. If students' everyday experiences of schooling (e.g., exposure to poor facilities and lower levels of academic knowledge) reinforce lesser aspirations for educational and occupational goals, then students will be unlikely to imagine themselves in a future beyond that with which they have familiarity. While the material aspects of differentiation that result in exclusion are evident, non-material factors are significant and – because of their apparently insubstantial nature – difficult to identify and to interrupt. Aspirations and beliefs are constructed by individuals as they interact in various realms of society, and mechanisms of stratification feel natural and normal. They are part of one's "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1984). All social institutions contribute to the perpetuation of social stratification; however, institutions of schooling do so despite being charged to ameliorate inequalities. It is troubling when instructional activities purported to lead to empowerment instead exacerbate inequalities, contributing to unequal outcomes for students. Working-class students' experiences of literacy, particularly writing, provide an example of this phenomenon.

Writing contributes to processes of exclusion in schools because schooling contributes to the construction of writers whose identities facilitate the reproduction of social stratification. Writing is essential to thinking; it shapes conceptual thoughts and allows writers to frame, reframe, extend and critique ideas. Given the significance of writing, it is important to consider what happens to thinking when writing is experienced as an alienating activity, disconnected from the self and disconnected from the possibility of empowerment. What happens when processes of schooling facilitate and enforce conceptions of literacy that reify social stratification by making class-based empowerment impossible? What happens when opportunities are excised by preventing the types of critical thinking necessary to challenge the status quo effectively?

High stakes testing and social class

> That's all (my teachers) have been saying since freshman year, "The ELA, the ELA. You have to practice for the ELA." I'm like, "all right!" Paige, an 11th grade student commenting on the English language arts (ELA) Regents examination during an in-depth interview.

Test results embed inequalities of race, ethnicity, and poverty. (G. Orfield & Kornhaber, 2001, p. 18) Compulsory curricula and high-stakes assessments are part of the coercive discursive structure of schooling. State mandated, standards-based curricula and the associated high-stakes examinations are powerful structural factors that contribute to the identity construction of students and teachers. Gunzenhauser (2006) asserts that the "high-stakes accountability movement has appropriated the technology of the examination to redefine the educated subject as a normalized case" (p. 241). Such a redefinition displaces alternative modes of accountability, "such as community responsibility of equitable educational opportunities" (Gunzenhauser, 2006, p. 241).

Moreover, a standardized or "normalized" representation of what it means to be an educated person inevitably precludes possibilities not associated with hegemonic, normative expectations. This is detrimental to poor and working-class students, whose native discourses and identities may not align with the middle-class norms of schooling privileged by examinations (Dorn, 2007; Hillocks, 2002; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Sacks, 2007).

The discourse of schooling has been infiltrated by the rhetoric of high-stakes assessments and, as Gee, Hull, and Lankshear (1996) note, practices of discourses relate directly to identity formation. Experiences of writing connect to discourse and identity because "the 'world on paper' is important: how we think and write about the world has a great deal to do with how we act in it and, thus, what becomes reality" (p. 25).

At Pontiac High School, the narrations of students indicate that the social class signifiers connected with the working class are reinforced by the discourse of high-stakes assessments. However, the demise of traditional working-class employment and the consequential reconstruction of the white working-class identity shift the context in which these signifiers perform. In the past, white working-class resistance to academic norms did not preclude the possibility of earning a living wage in an industrial setting. In the new economy, these opportunities are scarce and resistance is perilous. In general, at Pontiac High School, high-stakes testing reinforces a non-dialogic, instrumental approach to teaching and learning and a domesticating approach to writing. Therefore, rather than promoting transformational literacies, these assessments contribute to the reproduction of social class in this setting.

Despite the well-documented limitations and potential harm of assessment-based reform, in 1999 (prior to No Child Left Behind [NCLB] legislation) New York State

implemented graduation mandates that require students to pass examinations in the following content areas in order to earn a high school diploma: English Language Arts, Global History and Geography, United States History, Science and Mathematics. In a review of state assessments, Hillocks (2002) described New York State's requirements as "the most demanding examination regimen we have seen in this study" (p. 137). The exams, called "Regents" exams because they are administered by the New York State Board of Regents, include specific regulations for educators regarding administration, scoring and reporting.

Study setting

On paper, Pontiac High School (to ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for the research site as well as all participants) exemplifies several principles of progressive education. Its size, among "small school" enthusiasts, is considered ideal; enrollment in grades 9 through 12 hovers at about 800 students. Serving a community that is primarily white and suburban, with a small (about 5 percent) but growing minority population, Pontiac High is often described as the most sought after public district in Borderburg, a large first-ring suburb[ii] of a deindustrializing rust-belt city in the northeast United States. But there are indications that conditions in this suburban public school are less than idyllic. In the post-Columbine tradition, the school has adopted strict security-related tactics and procedures. There are security cameras inside and outside of the building which are monitored and reviewed regularly. A door monitor buzzes in visitors, who sign in and wear a bright yellow rectangular "Visitor's Pass."

Because Pontiac High School is located in a first-ring suburb, it embodies characteristics of both urban and suburban school cultures. The racial and ethnic composition of the student body resembles the primarily white populations of the region's suburban communities; however, disciplinary policies and procedure as outlined above indicate a sense of the need for "cracking down" on students to maintain control (Lipman, 2003).

Lipman (2003) links economic globalization to an "increased policing of youth through zero tolerance school discipline policies" (p. 81). Significantly, she demonstrates that regulation of youths is enacted in ways consistent with social class stratification i.e., schools serving minority and low-income youths impose more restrictions on both students and teachers than schools serving middle-class youths. Regulation of teachers tends to involve accountability mechanisms based on high-stakes tests. Regulation of students involves both curricular discipline and strict rules on conduct, dress, and

language. An attitude of zero-tolerance drives the school's code of conduct, police officers work closely with school administrators and, as data analyzed in this study will reveal, examinations dominate curriculum and instruction at Pontiac High School.

As an inner-ring suburb, this community is undergoing socio-economic shifts reflected in national metropolitan polarization as families seek to escape substandard urban schools and are able to access affordable housing in school districts such as the one being studied (M. Orfield, 2002). As Orfield notes, schools are particularly interesting sites for understanding demographic trends. "Schools are the first victim and the most powerful perpetuator of metropolitan polarization. Local schools become socioeconomically distressed before neighborhoods become poor; rising poverty among a community's school children predicts the future of its adults" (p. 3). This site is of particular interest because it offers the possibility of understanding how students in this working-class community perceive schooling and social class, and how their experiences and practices of writing reinforce and/or interrupt structures that maintain social class composition.

Study description

This study considers the meanings that students in a particular setting ascribe to their experiences of writing instruction and academic writing in school. The setting itself is relevant because the white working class, which is prevalent in the backgrounds of the faculty and the district's community, is undergoing significant transformations in the new economy. An additional aspect of this study involves the multilayered nature of schooling and its role in class construction. Schools, as social institutions, influence the opportunities available to students and teachers.

This study delves into the everyday activities and discussions of academic writing and the pedagogies that support or constrain it in this particular setting. Writing both constitutes and is a constituent of thought. Writing affects and is affected by one's use of language. Language, an element of discourse, is a signifier and a component of social class. This study explores the interconnectedness of written language, schooling, and social class in order to understand how students and teachers in this predominantly white inner-ring suburban high school use written language as they construct identities in the new economy.

Data collection

In order to understand how students in this school experience and practice writing and how these experiences and practices relate to identity construction and the structures of schooling and social class, I used non participant and participant observation, interviews, and document analysis.

Because I was employed as a teacher at the research site, I was there every school day, from 7:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. from early September through late June. In my capacity as a researcher, I engaged in participant observations at a wide range of activities. Serving as a participant-observer allowed me to consider the effect of structural and curricular factors on students' and teachers' experiences of academic writing. Furthermore, my observations provided essential groundwork for the development of interview questions as well as clues about emerging themes relevant to data analysis.

The second method of data collection focused on semi-structured in-depth interviews. For this study, I interviewed twenty students (10 female and 10 male) in grade 11. Students in this grade offer an interesting perspective that informs this study. They have attended school long enough to be able to reflect on and articulate their experiences in a meaningful way. They are beginning to consider their lives post-high school, but are not as focused on it (especially in the fall semester) as students in grade 12 would be.

Furthermore, in this school, students take the New York State Regents Examination in English Language Arts in January of their junior (11th grade) year, so these students will be exposed to the most immediate effects of this high stakes exam which they must pass (with a score of at least 65%) in order to graduate.

By using first quarter English language arts grades, I selected students who reflected a variety of ability levels and in the school. Because the class is composed almost equally of males and females, I attempted to select an equal number of males and females in each category. Aside from gender and achievement criteria which I intended to replicate, I selected students at random. In-depth interviews focused on experiences and practices of academic writing, the purposes and processes of writing, teachers' and students' perceptions of themselves as writers, and the influences of curriculum and assessment on school-based writing. All interviews were audiotaped with permission of the participants; for students, written permission from parents was also secured.

The final method of data collection involved document analysis. I analyzed numerous documents related to school-based interactions that involve writing. Such documents included letters to parents and students, course syllabi, class assignments/projects, written products by students and teachers, published school writing guidelines, assessment rubrics, and New York State Regents Examinations. In addition, I asked students to bring with them to their interviews two writing samples: 1) a piece of "typical" school writing, and 2) a piece of writing that was meaningful to them. (Of the twenty student participants I interviewed, fifteen brought with them samples of writing as requested. The others generally referred to documents they recalled during the relevant parts of the interview protocol.) These documents provided a useful starting point in discussing writing instruction, meaningful (and less meaningful) writing with students. In addition, they offered a concrete glimpse of how writing is assigned, conducted, and assessed in this setting.

After collecting the documents described, I read, reread, and sorted them into categories prior to coding. Documents that were directly connected to interviews and observations were copied and placed with the relevant transcripts and field notes so that data could be considered in both contexts (i.e., as "documents" to be analyzed and as supplementary and pertinent to the analysis of interviews and field notes). I examined, read and coded all documents to explore the how students narrate their experiences of written academic discourse.

Data analysis

All observations and document analyses were recorded as field notes and expanded as narratives. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for all participants, institutions, and locations. To facilitate analysis, notes and transcriptions were imported into Nudist data analysis software. When data collection was complete and transcriptions and field notes were imported, I read and analyzed data to identify topics for coding (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Stake, 1995; Weis, 2004).

To develop and facilitate analysis of codes, I used constant comparative methods, which enabled me to "establish analytic distinctions – and thus make comparisons at each level of analytic work" (Charmaz, 2009, p. 54).

To establish codes, I first read, word-by-word and line-by-line, through about one-third of each type of data, making notes on themes that emerged in order to create tentative coding categories. Using the constant comparative method, recurring themes and motifs related to my research questions were then identified as codes.

A categorized system of 81 codes emerged from the data, and all data were coded; double- and triple-coding occurred in some places. Coded chunks were organized through the software program, and I printed data from each code then created file folders housing these data. Individual codes had between 4 pages and 150 pages of data. I read data in every folder and took notes on emerging themes. I read and re-read the pieces while thinking about the themes before putting them back into their narrative form.

Data were considered in the contexts of social class and identity, as well as the social implications of discourses and composition. Examination of these concepts is interconnected with pedagogical theory in order to reflect on how experiences and practices of academic discourse affect learning, schooling, and identity construction.

Findings and discussion

This study yielded a wealth of data about students' experiences and perceptions of writing in school. This article will amplify two themes that emerged from student voices: 1) students' perceptions of writing in school, and 2) glimmers of resistance narrated by youth in relation to effects of neoliberalism.

Student perceptions of writing in school

> JG: What effect, if any, have New York State exams had on you as a writer?
> Alexis: Time limits. 'Cause that's really where they all come from…. I think it's extremely important that I become a good, fast, writer for college. I don't really know what sort of real life application I have, for the ability to write an excellent essay in forty-five minutes. But, that's what I have to do, so that's what I have to get good at. (Excerpt from student interview)
> In my most cynical moments, I wonder if the master plan is to train people not to think (Hillocks, 2002, p. 204).

Emphasizing the powerful impact of state assessments on conceptions of literacy, I found that students seamlessly connect writing with assessment. Characteristics of assessment-based writing assignments are narrated by students at various levels of academic achievement. Alexis, whose comments open this section, is on track to take Advanced

Placement (AP) English (a college level class) next year. Her average is in the mid-90s, so while her description of writing is not consistent with empowering literacies, her approach is effective with respect to school-based achievement (as measured by grades). Taylor's average in English class is in the high 90s. When asked about the types of writing she does in English class, she refers exclusively to test-preparatory assignments.

> JG: What kinds of essays are you doing in English?
> Taylor: We have ones from previous Regents exams. They'll give you a piece of writing and you've got to make all the information click together and put it into a certain (format).
> JG: Can you tell me about the typical piece of writing that you brought with you?
> Taylor: Yeah. I brought an English essay that I had to write. It's a critical lens. You had to compare two books to a quote that we got: "It is preoccupation with possession, more than anything else, that prevents men from living freely and nobly." I used Macbeth and The Green Mile, and we had to use literary elements and support to either agree or disagree (with the critical lens quote) using quotes from both books.
> JG: Why did you select that as a typical piece of school writing?
> Taylor: Most of my essays that I've written are critical lenses where you have to use novels, because basically that's what we were doing for English before the ELA (Regents examination). I've been doing that since last year, too, because that was what every single paper was on.
> JG: Can you describe how you wrote it?
> Taylor: We had to write the introduction and you had to make sure you had all the information that you needed in each paragraph.…One body paragraph was on…Macbeth and I had to use literary elements, and then supporting details for each one. Then in the next paragraph I had to do the other book the same way.

Before she even sees the assigned question for a task four essay, Taylor predicts the structure of her essay and, in general, the content of each paragraph. The notion that the process of writing primarily involves filling in blanks and reorganizing information contradicts sociocultural, constructivist notions of literacy and learning. While the types of assignments provided on state examinations might be useful in assessing basic language and organizational skills, they do not offer engagement in literacies that support deep understanding or development of empowering literacies (Finn, 1999). Newell (2005) explains that

> The underlying assumption that frames this discussion is that the extent to which information is manipulated enhances topic understanding. …In general, engagement is associated with the constraints of the writing task…Accordingly, the greater the range of composing processes a writing task engenders, the more likely the writer will focus on the relationships among the ideas that give them coherence an structure, and thus develop more coherent topic

> understanding. A second assumption is that different tasks focus the writer's attention in specific ways, and the effects of writing on learning from text are limited to the ideas that are expressed during composing. (p. 238)

It is evident, then, that merely repeating and reorganizing information does not involve true meaning making. In fact, according to Newell, superficial writing tasks undermine students' ability to learn from and/or about the ideas they repeat and minimally manipulate.

Students' experiences of writing at Pontiac High School are saturated with examination-based tasks. School-based literacies are restricted by the nature of the examinations and, as a consequence, students' developing proficiency as writers and thinkers is diminished.

A general question about writing in school prompts Jesse, whose first quarter average in English class was 70, to refer to preparation for the Regents exam, particularly the critical lens. He states that the writing assignments he gets are driven by the requirements of the examination.

> JG: What kinds of writing assignments do you get in school?
> Jesse: Basically, this year it's all been critical lens because we're preparing for the Regents. So they are trying to get us to remember all the things we did in high school, all the literature work, and combine it together to make a critical lens essay. Because that's what we need for the Regents.

Chloe, whose English average hovers near 90, also describes the critical lens task as typical of school-based writing. Although she does not name the task, she describes it as ubiquitous and confirms its formulaic format.

> JG: So this (referring to the essay Chloe brought to the interview) is a typical piece of school writing. Can you tell me what class it's for?
> Chloe: This is for English. It was that task where you have to prove a quote. He gives you a quote and then you have to reword the quote and then you have to prove the meaning of it, prove it with the book.
> JG: Why did you select it as typical?
> Chloe: Because it's just what we do every day. Every single day in class, every week, essays, essays, essays.
> JG: Can you describe how you wrote it?
> Chloe: I think the big thing is figuring out what the quote means, so you write that down. Then you have to get literary elements from the book to prove the quote and that's what you

> write in your body paragraphs. So, your quote's in the first paragraph and in the body paragraphs you're proving that.

Chloe indicates that her role in this process of writing is to uncover the meaning that is latent in the critical lens quote. She does not perceive herself as an active agent in constructing knowledge, but instead describes her task as "figuring out" what the quote she is given "means." Later in the interview, Chloe describes her aversion to writing critical lens essays, citing their restrictions on personal expression as well as their boring, repetitive nature.

> JG: Is there any type of writing you don't like to do?
> Chloe: The Regents writing.
> JG: Tell me about that writing.
> Chloe: It's easy to write if you get the idea, but it can get repetitive. It's really boring, and I kind of want to write my own thing but you have to stick to writing about the book, and there's things you can and can't do. I don't like getting limits on what you have to write.
> JG: Tell me some of those things you can and can't do.
> Chloe: You're not supposed to write plot summary and things like that. You have to prove the main point of the quote they give you for task four. It's easy, but I like to write to get the message that the book that you're writing about was sending. But because you have to use elements that are mostly characterizations of a character, it's not really the theme of the book.

Chloe hints at the possibility of using writing to seek understanding ("I like to write to get the message that the book that you're writing about was sending"). However, she sets this possibility in opposition to the type of writing she is allowed by the critical lens prompt, the structure of which (e.g., "you have to use elements that are mostly characterizations of a character") prevents her from engaging with what she sees as the real theme of the book – perhaps the meaning she has constructed as a reader and a writer. Furthermore, the prevalence of examination rhetoric with respect to writing is emphasized by Chloe's fluid familiarity with the other ELA examination tasks.

> JG: How about the other tasks?
> Chloe: Task one is a listening task. They read a passage or an essay that someone wrote and then you write notes on it. Then they give you another task that says "write in letter format" about an issue. You have to base your essay on a chart that they give you and a passage. On task three they give you your topic for you to write about and two (reading) passages and then you have to prove that topic.
> JG: Do you have any challenges or difficulties with writing?
> Chloe: Not really. …Because it's so repetitive you just have to get in your mind of what you have to write and once you memorize the format for it, you can write it.

Students consistently describe the limited forms of writing they do in school. Cameron, whose first quarter grades in social studies and English classes are below 50, describes examination based writing in social studies classes as repetitive and restrictive.

> Cameron: I just don't like doing thematic essays. It's one subject and it's like everybody's doing the same thing. It's not a variety. It's like you're doing the same thing everybody else is.
> JG: Right. And you don't like that because…?
> Cameron: Because it's like, say if you were to write it, a teacher's going to read it and then they're going to read the same thing (from every other student). It's, like, repetitive. I just feel like when I'm doing it I'm repeating what other people are saying and I just like to add my own thing.

Cameron's sense that school-based writing requires repeating the words of others emphasizes the lack of inquiry and engagement. This type of writing reinforces the perspective that knowledge exists outside the self and is apprehended or accessed, not constructed through interpretation and dialogue (Hillocks, 2002).

The practice of writing as repeating the words of authorities is consistent with a structuralist epistemology. From a structuralist epistemological perspective, "Knowledge is produced by transforming the raw material of concrete knowledge…into the finished product of concrete knowledge, by means of a mode of production of knowledge" (Oquist, 1978, p. 148). Student narrations describe writing as a means of restating ideas into particularly formatted finished products. Students in this study describe writing as an exercise in repetition rather than a means of expressing or developing thought. At best, concepts are repeated and information is reorganized. This approach to writing is reminiscent of reading from a script rather than engaging in dialogue.

Despite diverse levels of achievement, students are consistent in their critiques of assessment-based writing. Olivia, who is barely passing English this year, describes the critical lens essay as too structured and restrictive of the personal expression that would typify writing as a means of curricular "conversation".

> JG: What kinds of writing do you do in school?
> Olivia: The mandatory stuff, the essays that we have to do for English, for history, the critical lens…. I don't really like them. I think there's too much structure to them. You can't really say what you want to say. It pretty much tells you what has to be said and how it is. I don't think there's enough freedom to say what your opinion really is.
> JG: And what kinds of writing do you most dislike?

> Olivia: Essays, especially the critical lens (essays) because they're the most structured ones where you can't really say much.…
> JG: What do you mean by “the most structured”?
> Olivia: There's not much that you can really say. It's pretty much a set format. You read the quote, you interpret it, you say if you think you agree or disagree with it, you find a book related to it, all done.

Dylan, whose first quarter English average was 85, describes the critical lens essay as typical of the writing he does in school. He expresses frustration with the prescriptive, formulaic nature of this type of writing.

> JG: Tell me about the piece of writing that you selected as typical school writing. Did you bring one of those?
> Dylan: Yeah. It's on Macbeth. We have this Regents exam we had a couple of weeks ago. Again, there's four types of essays you can write and what (the teacher) did was – all year until the Regents – he just made us write the same essay over and over again because it's the exact formula and this exact essay is what you'll get a hundred times.
> JG: What do you mean?
> Dylan: He'd write the notes, with blanks: "The literary element [blank] can be used to prove that [blank]; and the author [blank] used his [blank] to prove [blank]. This is seen in the scenes where the character [blanked]." He gave us the exact formula for this essay. I got probably 20 essays in my binder that are exactly pretty much the same as this – except (citing) different stories.

Dylan makes it clear that he did a great deal of writing during the nineteen weeks prior to the state examination. However, he questions the quality of the literacy experiences these types of writing provide. Writing based strictly on fill-in-the-blanks examination tasks is not likely to foster the development of complex thinking skills. Newell (2005) explains that

> Writing in and of itself may or may not serve as a tool to promote learning. Although writing may at least potentially serve as a means for the development of thought, it can only do so within the complex and rich social contexts that have been restructured according to teachers’ conceptions of learning and the school’s values. (p. 242)

If the writing experiences of students reflect the teachers’ conceptions learning and the school’s values, then it is evident that the examination serves as the basis for the structuralist epistemology of literacy in this school. Examination-based writing tasks dominate instruction, and the narrations of students reflect the powerful effect of state assessments on curricula and pedagogies and students’ lived experience in this setting.

Scholars are clear in their assertion that students in poor and working-class schools are inordinately affected by the high-stakes standardized assessment-based reform. It is particularly interesting to note that *all* student participants were consistent in their narration of the powerful effects of the ELA commencement level assessment on the writing instruction they experience. Failing students as well as students who are enrolled in enriched English, a class intended to prepare them for AP English, are affected by the restricted approach to literacy defined by the state assessment. It is discouraging to see that even students who comply with academic norms – those who do *not* enact resistance – cannot escape the deleterious pedagogical effects that standardized assessments have on students in working-class schools. Compliant students may develop basic literacy skills, those consistent with domesticating writing and a structuralist approach to literacy but not with success in the new economy. Resistant students who refuse to participate in even basic writing activities are further disadvantaged.

Riley, who earned a 65 in English class during the first marking period, narrates faith in the instruction she is receiving. She describes the intensity of test preparation in both English and social studies classes. Her goal as a student writer connects explicitly to her performance on the written portion of the Regents examinations.

> JG: What's your goal as a student writer, in school?
> Riley: Basically my goal is to do good on my essays because for English or US (history) or global, because you have to do them for exams. So my goal is to basically practice as much as I can so I can do good on the U.S. (History) Regents coming up in June. And, of course, I've been practicing for this English.
> JG: So what kinds of things do you do to work toward that goal?
> Riley: I basically practice. In our U.S. (History) books we have those practice Regents (examinations). I basically practice the essay parts because that will help me get an understanding of what the Regents is asking and how to write it. And in English we've been practicing like two months, and that's just basically practice, and practice makes perfect. Essay writing is practicing because, for the Regents, it's New York State. You don't know how they think for their essays and I think practicing for them will give you an understanding of how they want you to write it and basically knowing more and more about what they're asking. I just think it's best to practice; that's why they prepare us with all these essays and stuff like that.

Riley alludes to the need to learn to think like "the state" in order to succeed on examinations. She expresses the need to practice so that she can understand "how they want you to write" and "know…about what they're asking." Riley's words highlight the

structuralist epistemology in that knowing and even thinking are defined through the hegemonic influence of state assessments.

Students describe perceptions of the ELA Regents examination as structured, formulaic, and limiting personal expression. They recount explicit instructions that resemble a "fill-in-the-blank" approach, as opposed to a recursive, reflective process of writing. Nelson (2001) asserts the fallacious nature of this approach.

> Young people deserve writing classes with a vision that sees beyond tests, writing classes that do more than just teach skills and correctness and five-paragraph, write-by-the-numbers essays. In order to survive (physically, psychologically, spiritually) in the world of the twenty-first century, our students deserve and desperately need the power of the Word as an instrument of creation—a power that lies far beyond any instrument to measure standards. (p. 58)

Despite Nelson's claim, narrations of students at Pontiac High affirm the prevalence of "common sense" that reinforces structuralist epistemological approach toward learning and literacy. While this is not a new phenomenon – i.e., schooling has traditionally been dominated by positivist notions of knowledge – high-stakes standards-based assessments have reinforced teaching as transmission and learning as passive. Students perceive school-based literacies as formulaic, alienating, and meaningless. Pedagogical approaches that involve self-expression, making sense, complex thinking – i.e., empowering literacies – are imperceptible in this setting.

High-stakes examinations have lessened the likelihood that social constructivist epistemologies which might offer access to powerful literacies and engaged experiences of writing can thrive. Curriculum and instruction are dominated by the discourse of high-stakes testing, which precludes dialogue that could lead to transformative pedagogies.

Both high-achieving, compliant students and failing, resistant students are subjected to writing instruction that reinforces domesticating rather than empowering literacies. Schools, as social institutions, are necessarily infused with exercises of power. These exercises of power naturally result in student resistance, which can inhibit literacy learning. Two ways of addressing the negative effects of such resistance include expanding student choice and tapping into student resistance. If educators can provide spaces for resistance to become constructive, spaces where students have a choice and a voice, spaces where their native literacies are invited into schools, we can engage

reluctant readers and writers in ways that will enable them to be successful students and, more importantly, successful and literate makers of meaning in society.

Glimpses of student resistance

At Pontiac High School, writing is rarely used as a means of critical thinking. This reality is significant because student identities are affected by their uses of language, whether they accept the principles and effects of academic writing or resist them. Shor elaborates, beginning with Kenneth Dowst's definition of composition as "the activity of making some sense out of an extremely complex set of personal perceptions and experiences of an infinitely complex world...A writer (or other language-user), in a sense, composes the world in which he or she lives" (Dowst, 1980, p. 66). Shor (1997) asserts that the implications of critical literacy for student writers are profound.

> Because there are multiple ideologies at the root of the social experiences which make us into who we are (for example, male supremacy, white supremacy, corporate supremacy, heterosexism), the positions or identities for contesting the status quo also need to be appropriately multiple. Critical literacy thus crosses identity boundaries because it is a discourse and pedagogy for counter-hegemonic resistance. This resistance occasionally becomes a common cause against dominant culture when diverse insurgent groups coalesce, but much stands in the way of coalitions in a society where *every difference is used against us* (emphasis in original) by an elite minority maintaining power by divide-and-conquer among other mechanisms. (Working Through the Writing Class, para. 9)

While their ability to effect change may be limited, a few students narrate resistance to the norms of writing instruction at Pontiac High. Samuel, who writes poetry for a personal blog and is heavily involved in an online game which requires creative writing, relies on himself rather than the school to improve his writing. He seems to have managed to fulfill the school's writing expectations (albeit barely, with grades in the 60s) without compromising his own thought processes. However, he is not confident that his own written products will be taken seriously by teachers.

> Samuel: That's where writing comes in handy…being able to think outside the box.
> JG: How does writing help you do that?
> Samuel: It's actually myself who helps me do that for writing. If you can think outside the box, you can read a task and know what it's looking for and not follow the straight path, to kind of swerve around and use different ideas.
> JG: What is your goal as a student writer?

> Samuel: I don't know. There've been times where they do that poetry or story submission (for the school's literary magazine). There've been times when I've had, like, ten pages of poems to hand in and I just never got the guts to do it because I feel it would be taken advantage of. Like, people would overlook the fact of how it actually meant. They would read it and just be, like, "Oh, that's good," and just keep going. I would want somebody to actually think about it and not just read it and be done with it.

Despite his extensive use of writing outside school, Samuel is barely passing English. Although his personal experience has taught him that writing equates with thinking, he narrates a lack of trust in the school's commitment to appreciate the meanings in his poetry. He perceives the school's approach to writing as cursory and superficial, not worthy of his own work. The institutional forces that affect academic writing, however, have not prevented Samuel from maintaining his own identity as a writer outside the academic arena.

An outspoken student athlete, Grace challenges the status quo in a few areas. First, she flouts the "empty vessel" viewpoint by recommending that teachers ask students for input with respect to curriculum and instruction. Second, despite admittedly exerting minimal effort, she calls for more and more challenging writing assignments. Grace notes that students' first reactions are likely to be negative, acknowledging that if *she* were asked what she wants to read or write, would probably say "nothing." However, she narrates a belief that more, and more challenging, writing would ultimately be beneficial for students.

> JG: What most needs to be changed to make writing in school better?
> Grace: Probably the input that we need to give to the teachers. I think that they need to ask – well, I don't know if I was a teacher if I would really like this, because if a teacher asked me, "What do you think we should do?" I would probably be, like, "Nothing." But even so, I think that maybe they should ask us, like, give us a choice of novels, or give (students) a summary of the books: "This one's about high school," or "This one's about math." Obviously we're going to pick the one about high school because we're in high school. They should give us a choice of the novels and give (assign) us a well thought out essay on our feelings or what we think about the good novel that we pick.

It is interesting to note that Grace, who is from a working-class background, exhibits a sense of negotiated curriculum that is typically associated with middle-class norms (Finn, 1999). Her indication of a willingness to employ the skill of negotiation illustrates the possibility of constructive resistance by employing the tactics of the professional elite.

> JG: Do you think this school's writing instruction fulfills its purpose for most of its students? Are we giving you what you need?
> Grace: I think that they are but, again, I think that the teachers should require more. Yeah, the students are going to complain and moan and groan, but I think that if we boosted up the writing a little bit then I think that people would become better writers and grades would increase because then we would do more work, but it would help us. It wouldn't be a negative thing for us, it would be positive. So I think that if they increased what we need to do then I think it would be better.

Grace's critique is on target, since the effectiveness of the combination of choice and challenge is well-documented in scholarship about writing instruction. Moffett (1998) explains why Grace's perspective is accurate.

> Personal choice is at the center (of language learning), not only so that the learner cares about what he is doing, but so that good judgment will develop…The wisest decision for educators to make is to stock a classroom with as many things as possible to *choose among* (all emphases in original). The traditional classroom has not had *enough* structures. This is one way in which it has been overcontrolled. One lesson plan for all each day, one sequence for the year – that is not to structure *more*, it is simply to let a single structure monopolize the learning field. This monopoly rules out any real possibility of learning to develop judgment, which requires that the learner be structur*ing* in school, not structu*red* by the school. Structuring is choosing. Comprehending, composing, making sense of the world – these are structuring. School should be harder and more fun. (p. 24)

Olivia had English grades in the high 80s last year but is barely passing this year. She attributes the change in achievement to conflicts with her current teacher, whom Olivia states, she doesn't "get along with." Olivia believes that exercising choice as a writer will irritate her teacher, yet she is willing to risk displeasing her teacher in order to experiment with a form that she thinks might please her audience. Comments just prior to this excerpt indicate that Olivia believes that her teachers don't always understand or appreciate her writing because she puts too much of herself into the task.

> JG: Can you explain what you mean by that, you do more with the content than with addressing the task?
> Olivia: Well, if the task is to write an application, a college application essay like what we're doing in English now, what I did instead, was that I decided to do something different. Instead of an essay I wrote a funny little poem for it. Because nobody wants – they don't want millions and millions of essays. Who wants to read a bunch of essays? I think they'd like to see something a little bit different.
> JG: And how did your teacher react to that?

> Olivia: I'm not so sure because I haven't handed it in yet, but I don't think she's going to like it. I don't think it totally addresses the task good enough.
> JG: If you think she's not going to take it well, why would you do it?
> Olivia: I started it and at first it was just something I was playing around with and then I really liked it. It does address the task; it's just not an essay.

Writing that is grounded in inner speech is inextricably intertwined with students' identities. The self cannot be separated from the written product, much as content cannot be divided from composition nor form torn from function. For this assignment, Olivia chose to use a different form for the function of presenting herself, employing a bit of self-creation that positions her differently from the working-class norm of those who just follow the rules. However, many students at Pontiac High School describe writing as separate from self. Olivia reinforces the presence of this discourse because she expects that writing she feels connected to, and that she believes will engage her audience, is likely to be unacceptable to her English teacher.

> Moffett explains why disconnecting writing from the author's "self" is misguided. However personal or impersonal the subject matter, *all* writing as authoring must be some revision of inner speech for a purpose and an audience. To say this is not at all to say that writing is solipsistic thinking about narcissistic content or even that it favors "personal experience." Because of the circularity (between inner and outer speech), one's revised inner speech may reflect convention so much as to hardly bear a personal mark. (Moffett, 1988, p. 140)

Dylan, an avid reader with a 70 average in English, narrates a scathing critique of writing instruction at Pontiac High as well as the Regents examination that drives this instruction.

> JG: How would your teachers describe you as a writer?
> Dylan: All my teachers would probably say "good." "Very good but could be better if he tried" is what I usually get..... It's …because a lot of times I won't follow the guidelines as good as they hope, or I'll make changes in the essay because I think it sounds better that way. But that'll be a bad thing, because it's supposed to be exactly like they wrote it …They'll say, "four paragraphs," and I'll do five because it needed it. Just bend the rules.

Like Olivia, Dylan refers to the rule-following behavior typical of working-class schools and he resists the strict prescriptions of his writing assignments. In addition, he ascribes the writing process and product with having agency ("I'll do five because *it* needed it"). As writers, Olivia and Dylan feel capable of making authorial decisions, particularly

regarding form and structure, but the discourse around writing at Pontiac High discourages them from doing so. Questioning the status quo becomes an act of resistance. Dylan narrates strong animosity towards the school's approach to writing. He is critical of English classes, condemning both the content and pedagogy as dull, repetitive, and mind deadening.

> JG: What kinds of classroom activities go along with writing?
> Dylan: I can run you through it. In the class I'm in, like I said, up until Regents (examination) was finally over, we just did the same thing. I realized after watching this class for so long, (that) he (the English teacher) only had three lesson plans and he'd just circulate them. One day he'd give us all these notes and tell us how to write that one essay there, and the next day we'd write that essay, and the third day he'd hand us back all the essays saying they were terrible and tell us to rewrite. And then the next day, he'd come in and say the rewrite essays were terrible so we're going to take more notes. So then we'd write notes, the next day he'd say it's terrible and just keep going on everyday. He'd give us the notes and instructions on exactly how to write it and then he'd give us the piece of paper that tells us the exact guideline and then write our essay. I have one of those pages with the exact guidelines for an essay. Here's one (pointing to a document he brought to the interview). They give you … the critical lens: "All literature is protest." You can't name a single literary work that isn't protest? It's okay, but I don't think it's entirely true. Maybe it is, when you think about it, but, again, when I'm writing an essay of that kind – it's not really what matters. Saying all the right things and trying to get examples that match it is what matters…That's an okay quote, but it seems awfully specific. The critical lens quotes always annoy me because sometimes it'll be a half a sentence and it'll be like, "All literature is bad," or there'll be a quote and I'm positive that it was taken out of a book and they (the writers) see what their context is, and the quotes are completely nonsensical because it'll say, "Muhad maghandi" is the quote, or "I don't like cats." But where was he (the author) going with that? And how can I write an essay on that if I don't actually know what he meant by that?

Dylan states that what matters is "saying all the right things." He asserts the importance of context in his ability to construct meaning from text. When asked about the feedback he gets from teachers on his writing, Dylan describes an act of resistance on his part: writing what he was thinking.

> JG: So what kinds of feedback do you get on the things that you're writing?
> Dylan: I had a teacher that I really didn't like a year ago and she made us write this essay. And it was after we did ten of these (types of) essays and I just got so sick of the format that I was really annoyed with it. So I just wrote this essay that was exactly how I'm talking now. It was in a conversational tone with that whole dry humor thing and I was being really, really sarcastic. I knew I'd get an F on it. It was actually an important grade so it was a dumb idea to do it, but I passed (the course) so I don't care. But I just got so sick of it, I just wrote

> completely how I – what I – was actually thinking. I remember kind of getting mad about it. I went to the principal about it but he didn't really care. It was this big essay and we had the standard rules of written English which it was graded by and I admit the essay was not a traditional essay and I understood I'd get a bad grade, but it was a big grade – out a hundred – and she gave me a zero on it. And it was like a three page essay, too. I knew I was going to get a terrible grade on it, but she gave me a zero on it and it annoyed me because I wrote it at least. That should be one point right there.
> JG: So what are your teachers' expectations about writing?
> Dylan: It's mostly just follow the format, agree with everything, agree with all the quotes and again a lot of repetitive stuff like that. They tell you what to write and you copy it down exactly. The only difference between your essay and the guy next to you is the name on top of the essay.
> I try to write creatively when I can but after years of going through English I've got their expectations figured out: to write what they, to say what they want to hear. And I can accept that. I usually know what it is they want us to write so I'll just forego creativity and just give them that. But again sometimes I'll just go off on my own or I'll get creative with it a little. I do one of those quote papers and actually try disagreeing with it instead, because it says you can agree or disagree. But the problem is, they give us this long format and tell us how to agree and you're not allowed (to disagree)…Our teacher actually tells us you're not allowed to disagree. You'll get a zero on the essay if you disagree. So they (state examination directions) say "or disagree" but they really don't mean it. Occasionally I'll try to do that but I'll just end up getting in trouble or getting a bad grade because all of those essays are agree with the quote and then use proofs from two books we read in class. So basically the quote they pick has to do with the books, obviously. But that's the thing, it's impossible to disagree with one of their critical lens quotes because if you disagree with it there's nothing to cite. So you can't do that.

Dylan's narration reveals a sense of being silenced through academic writing. He feels that his authorial agency is stifled by the school's approach to writing. He describes being told what to write and how to write it, depicting his teachers as authoritarian and the state examination as hypocritical. He states that he has been told that he cannot disagree with the powerful, hegemonic expectations of this educational institution, and reports being punished by teachers and stifled by the state examination. Although many students elect either to comply enough to earn good grades or to shirk their work and earn zeros, Dylan enacts resistance through his writing. This act is punished with a zero as though it is equal to nothing. Dylan has learned that writing what he thinks, for example, by disagreeing with a critical lens quote, is equivalent to a zero.

Dylan is openly critical of his teachers, narrating a strong sense of resistance to what he perceives as an oppressive environment, one which promotes neither creative nor critical

thought. Although Dylan has not yet been successful in his challenges to authority, his willingness and ability to articulate critique represent a step toward critical literacy. Shor (1997) explains the connection between literacy and critical literacy.

> …*literacy* is understood as social action through language use that develops us as agents inside a larger culture, while *critical literacy* is understood as "learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations" (Anderson and Irvine, 19993, p. 82). Consequently, my opening question, "What is critical literacy?," leads me to ask, "How have we been shaped by the words we use and encounter? If language use is one social force constructing us ('symbolic action' as Kenneth Burke, 1966, argued), how can we use and teach oppositional discourses so as to remake ourselves and our culture?" (Introduction, para. 3)
> Essentially, then, critical literacy is language use that questions the social construction of the self. When we are critically literate, we examine our ongoing development, to reveal the subjective positions from which we make sense of the world and act in it. (Introduction, para. 4)

Courtney and Olivia critique the writing instruction at Pontiac High School. Samuel doubts that his writing would be taken seriously by school personnel, so he maintains and nurtures his identity as a writer outside of school. Dylan does not allow himself to be a passive language user in school. He maintains the right to use language to critique and resist, even when his efforts are punished.

Conclusion

My interest is in language use and thinking, how they are defined and assessed, and how they are opened up or shut down by social circumstances (Rose, 2006, p. 1)

Neoliberal reforms represent an intensification of the alienating effects of schooling, particularly for students in poor and working-class communities. As DiMatteo explains,

> Schools basically provide a way to make contemporary social conditions appear natural and normal and those who criticize them appear deranged or inspired, in either case not well-adjusted or destined for material success (at least not in this lifetime). …The classroom is recognized as an alienating environment where students train to allow themselves to be exploited or to exploit others, grooming to be part of a labor market ... (p. 143)

Rare as they are, however, critique and resistance are present. Despite the ways in which social institutions exert power in their experiences of schooling, students affirm the gap

between what is happening and what ought to be happening. This awareness is the first step toward transformation. Such awareness can lead to critiques that connect to what Zavarzadeh and Morton (1994) refer to as "theory as resistance," an epistemological stance that embraces struggle and engagement over discipline and disengagement.

Including, better yet, *amplifying* the voices of youth opens possibilities for transformation beyond strategies and practice, providing spaces for participatory action research and critical policy analysis projects that engage with, rather than speak for, learners. As DiMatteo notes, "theory as resistance is not an ethical imperative but an epistemological one, because any other mode of learning would be subservient to the ruling powers and thus void of real critical knowledge. To struggle is to know" (p. 1).

Moffett's (1988) words offer a fitting conclusion to this article. In discussing the effects of the "educational-industrial complex," he is reminded of the agency that learners bring to classrooms – agency that is typically neither recognized nor nurtured in working class schools. Teachers are also part of the educational culture, and teachers in this high school were educated in working-class schools. It is likely, then, that their own experiences of literacy were domesticating rather than transformative. Furthermore, as actors in the educational-industrial complex, teachers "feel powerless and don't trust their perceptions" (p. 9). To inspire teachers, Moffett reminds them of the agency learners possess. They are not "blank slates" or "empty vessels." Education ought to be an awakening of what we know, a construction of identity that includes the awareness of our continuous state of becoming.

> I remember a dedication in a book I have forgotten. It read: "To So-and so, who taught me what I know." No, no, it didn't read that; my cliché-ridden mind read that. I looked again: "who taught me *that* I know." Who taught me that I know. What I know that's of use to you is that you know. Sweeping aside the intervening clutter, recall yourself as a young learner, then review those learners in front of you. You know. But you must assume the power to do what you know. (p. 9)

The students who are hinting at resistance know that the current state of affairs is not working, and they are not afraid to say so. Their critiques represent the power of possibility.

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Notes

[i] Portions of this work originally appeared in *Power, Resistance, and Literacy: Writing for Social Justice* (Information Age, 2011).

[ii] Inner-ring, or first-ring, suburbs refers to communities that lie just outside central cities; generally they have contiguous borders with the cities they adjoin.