



Interactional order, moral order: Classroom interactions and the institutional production of identities



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ABSTRACT

Scholars examining the interplay of the global and local in literacy practice have relied on a variety of tools to understand the implications of larger-scaled histories in moment-by-moment classroom action. Drawing on data from a multi-year ethnography of an urban Catholic school in Philadelphia, this article examines how the categorization of literacy practices by students and teachers during classroom-level interactions reveals different layered histories and contradictions of urban schooling. Following Heller's linguistic anthropology of schooling (1995, 2007), I focus on how teachers and students construct what constitutes knowledge during classroom reading events and demonstrate how various interactions and literacy practices are linked to moral orders that can only be understood with regards to the transforming genealogy of urban Catholic schools.

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1. Introduction

Scholars writing at the intersection of New Literacy Studies and the linguistic anthropology of education have been working for several years now to understand the interactional production of identity within institutions, notably institutions with layered histories of stratification (Collins & Slembrouck, 2009; Wortham, 2008). In examining how people come to take on recognizable identities in schools, these studies have sought to understand how institutions provide identity categories, linguistic regimes, and orders of discourse for students to engage with as part of local, state, and national projects of racialization, ethnonationalism, and language planning (cf., Castanheira, Green, Dixon, & Yeager, 2007; Flores, 2014). This article examines the potential for understanding one portion of that project: how the *interactional order* of schools—often played out in pedagogic activities that organize teacher and student conversational turns—contributes to the discursive production of contemporary urban schooled identities. Further, I illustrate how the interactional features in these classroom spaces are linked to a corresponding *moral order*—a hierarchical way of organizing and categorizing students based on locally-developed patterns of identification regarding right and wrong. To this, I provide a series of examples drawn from my own ethnographic work in an urban Catholic school in Philadelphia (LeBlanc, 2016), which is itself trying

to unfold an interactional and moral order in the midst of substantive demographic change and economic turmoil.

To begin, I outline a conceptual framework for understanding social categorization and the interactional order in classrooms. Here I synthesize the work of linguistic anthropologist Monica Heller (2001, 2007) with regards to her contribution to literacy studies. Heller's research examines the institutional life of schools to understand how narratives of social differentiation takes place in the classroom through the production of categories and concepts in and through the interactional order: how students come to take on identities during the formulaic back-and-forth of classroom talk. Tracing the genealogies of what is constructed as official knowledge through institutional structures requires that we understand even micro-interactions with “reference to the histories of that interaction” (Heller, 2007, p. 634). Literacy practices do not come to institutions *ex nihilo*, but rather have longer lineages of indexicality (Wortham, 2006): they point beyond themselves to histories of use. In this article, I hope to illustrate how Heller's amalgam of several critical sociologies of language (most notably Bourdieu and Goffman) has proved helpful in examining the interactional production of difference, and in that respect say something about the potential for literacy studies scholars to draw on the tools of sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology.

I situate these kinds of classroom and literacy-focused interactions in an urban Catholic school in Philadelphia, St. Dominic

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Savio,¹ amongst African American and Asian American students to demonstrate the value of a perspective that recognizes the creativity and novelty of student language practice, as well as institutions' capacities for limiting and delimiting what constitutes an appropriate response. Here, I look at how intersecting religious, racialized, and institutional identities cohere together in classroom talk (Juzwik & McKenzie, 2015; Thomas, 2013), providing resources for institutional actors to deploy in interaction. Drawing on a larger year-long ethnography of the school (for more details about the study, see LeBlanc, 2015, 2016), with a focus on classroom interaction around text, I attempt here to show how schools, students, and teachers weld classroom-level interactions to multi-scaled ideologies of race, morality and achievement. And where others have broadly conceived of education as a moral enterprise (cf., Purpel, 1988), I look closely to classroom talk around text to show the building blocks of the process of moral differentiation in this particular urban school. I show how specific interactional categories (when to speak, who may speak, what they may say) are linked with historically-developed moral categories, and in doing demonstrate how schools produce "outsiders within" (Cookson & Persell, 1991)—students technically possessing all the rights of others in the Catholic school but subtly marginalized. In foregrounding here Catholic schooling here, we can see how moral categorization is a process of *all types of schooling*—both religious and secular/public—and a core part of how literacy practices are understood by teachers and students alike. We can equally see how these moral categorizations are built upon and contribute to other projects of racialization and classroom order in service of the contradictions of contemporary schooling.

2. Categories and social stratification in classroom life

To understand how some knowledge is considered valid and 'official' and how schools participate (at times unconsciously) in the unequal distribution of knowledge in service of social reproduction requires looking closely at classroom interaction. Scholars working at this intersection of New Literacy Studies and linguistic anthropology prove particularly germane. Tension between what some have deemed structure/agency, macro/micro, and constraint/emergence has been the source of much consternation in the critical social sciences for a generation (cf., Blommaert, 2015; Wortham, 2012). For example, Giddens' work (1984) on structuration, the means by which social process and interaction contribute to hardening social structures, invokes several of these same key tensions. Further, Bourdieu's work on *habitus and hexis* (2000), core terms in understanding how social structures ideologies becomes imprinted into our very bodily orientations to the world, addresses similar problems. But it is to Heller's classroom-level work (cf., 1995, 2001, 2007) that I wish to address this argument about student agency in literacy practice, in part because her oeuvre draws together a number of critical sociologies (including those of Bourdieu, Foucault, and Cicourel), and in part because her work provides a set of theoretical frameworks for examining how the social production of knowledge and identities in classrooms is unequally stratified and tied to multiscale institutional histories.

New Literacy Studies has, of course, gone through a similar debate around the social construction of action since the early 2000s by way of what Brandt and Clinton (2002) famously deemed the "limits of the local" in first and second wave literacy ethnographies. From this perspective, New Literacy Studies had sacrificed the impact of macro-social processes and flows for local descrip-

tion, often through sustained ethnographic work in seemingly 'bound' communities. This critique was particularly germane to so-called 'third wave' New Literacy Studies projects (cf., Prinsloo & Baynham, 2008), which have worked to incorporate both political economy and network analysis (Leander & Lovvorn, 2006) as a way to account for 'flows' and 'trajectories' of information, texts, and bodies. Other literacy scholars have argued for the need to incorporate notions of 'scales' with regards to the relation between the local and the global (cf., Stornaiuolo & LeBlanc, 2016; Compton-Lilly & Halverson, 2014; see also Canagarajah & De Costa, 2016), situating interaction within nested and connected relationships of authority and distribution beyond the fleeting and the momentary. Each of these concerns is in some way trying to untangle how what is seemingly distant from the day-to-day work of interaction in classroom is somehow still participating in the life of those spaces.

But it was in the uptake of contemporary critical theory (notably of the mid-to-late 20th century French variety) that classroom-level scholars began to understand classrooms less as the production of harmonious cultures and more as discursive spaces which often papered over the inherent contradictions of schooling, particularly schooling in late industrial nation-states (Bourdieu, Passeron, & Saint Martin, 1994). While these scholars have historically drawn on neo-Marxian strains of this criticism, Heller's work (1995, 2001, 2006) turns to Bourdieu to empirically trace discourses of ethnonationalism, language ideologies, and race into classrooms, prominently in the areas of French ethnonationalism in Canada. In doing so, Heller has opened up possibilities for understanding a variety of intersecting and overlapping interests playing out at the interactional level. In particular, Heller is interested in the ways that Francophone schools in English Canada must reconcile two competing contradictions: first, the more general contradiction between narratives of meritocracy that have historically played out in schools by way of social reproduction and narratives of schools as spaces of social mobility and democratic reasoning; and second, the contradiction between narratives of Canadian bilingualism as an official ethnonationalist policy and the institutional procedures in French schools for protecting French legitimacy. Heller (2007) argues persuasively that how these contradictions are smoothed over is often carried out through the small scale back-and-forth of classroom traffic. It is through harmonizing these seeming contradictions that schools participate in the production of the dominant ideology. And it is here that we can productively draw on Heller's work to see how small-scale interactional research that hopes to take into account broader institutional powers and national discourses must look beyond the literacy event itself (see also Wortham & Reyes, 2015²) and engage at multiple institutional levels of what some have called the "global and the local" (Brandt & Clinton, 2002).

I take up these ideas through an engagement with contemporary urban Catholic schooling, itself an institution fraught with contradictions and instabilities, both in persisting economic tensions and in its histories of traditional pedagogy. By considering classrooms as contested ground, vetted and constructed through the unequal distribution of resources, Heller takes on a distinctly Bourdieusian frame: schools are sites of social reproduction, wherein privileged fractions convert their economic capital into cultural and symbolic capital and back again (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977/1990, 1979;

² Wortham (2006, 2012) is equally a valuable resource with regards to thinking about the production of identity in classrooms across or 'beyond' the single (speech) event. Where Heller's work diverges is three-fold. First is in her interest in institutional histories as a source of understanding social differentiation in interaction. The second is in her willingness to 'scale jump' to larger narratives of nationalism, ethnolinguistics, etc. as explanatory mechanisms for small-scale data. And the third, wherein Wortham is largely concerned with linguistic ideologies, Heller is particularly interested in literacy and the field of New Literacy Studies.

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

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