

Theory to Practice

I Ain't Reading that Book: Making Space for Resistance in the Postsecondary Literacy Classroom

Gail Gibson
Sinclair Community College

This article explores how perceived gaps in postsecondary literacy readiness can be understood as a function of a student's resistance to the social, cultural, and political constraints of traditional literacy instruction, rather than an isolated issue of individual skills remediation. Informed by sociocultural understandings of language use and learning, this article argues that college students labeled as lacking reading or writing skills may instead be actively choosing to resist school literacies in ways both subtle and overt. Using selected research and the author's experiences teaching college reading, the article examines how instructors might reconsider assumptions about and responses to classroom resistance, and concludes with a discussion of how making space for student resistance can result in literacy instruction that holds more relevance for adult students as they adapt to the language requirements of college learning.

Discussions about developmental college readers and writers most often focus on deficit, an absence of skills, and the importance of testing both as a measure of achievement and a predictor of future success. Excluded from this view are considerations of the ways that older learners already use language to shape their existing and emerging student identities, and the ways that students make deliberate choices—whether subtly or overtly—to resist literacy acts valued by schools that may conflict with those identities.

Yet, any given day in a college reading or basic writing course can reveal familiar behaviors: student grumbling about placement in the course, the texts selected, or the assignments given; student silence

during class discussion or outright rejection of the conversation; and course requirements left ignored, even at the risk of a failing grade. Given this classroom reality, I was surprised only by the bluntness during a recent discussion of an assigned text in one developmental reading course when Deborah (a pseudonym) leaned back in her chair and interjected flatly, “I ain't reading that book.”

The choices suggested in our cultural narrative about literacy and schooling appear to be easy ones: to choose postsecondary education and the academic discourse of the college classroom is to also choose certain middle-class values and to gain perceived economic benefit. Students who resist this narrative are viewed

as inviting failure by their own hand. Even those students who strive to adhere to that narrative, however, too often discover that efforts to adapt to college literacy practices can exact a price in altering one's sense of self and community and relationships (Bizzell, 1986; Yagelski, 2000; Young, 2004).

For many students, one method of maintaining their sense of identity is to oppose, in some way, mainstream academic literacies; a book dismissed or a paper assignment ignored may not be resistance for the sake of resistance, but a form of self-preservation instead (Henry, 1995; Ivanič, 1997). If factors such as (perceived) relevance of the class material, prior (negative) schooling experiences, or cultural differences

between the campus setting and home environments suggest to some students that there is something wrong with their existing sense of their language and identity, rejecting classroom literacy practices becomes a means of protecting identity and reproducing his/her existing cultural understandings.

In this article, I offer a theoretical framework for understanding student resistance in the college literacy classroom and then explore how such resistance can be incorporated into an instructor's pedagogical practices, using selected research and my own efforts in college reading classroom to get beyond, "I ain't reading that book." This discussion of resistance theory is not intended to suggest a view of students in developmental college literacy courses as simply willful, disobedient, or deviant, nor is it intended as an excuse for classroom disruption or student neglect of work. Rather, resistance theory is presented here as one way of understanding literacy learning in adult students that looks beyond notions of struggling college readers and writers who need somehow to be caught up, fixed up, or otherwise remediated, and recognizes instead that adult students labeled as lacking reading or writing skills may be actively choosing to reject certain school literacies based on notions of identity and culture within and beyond the classroom.

Theoretical Perspective: Resistance Theory as Literacy Practice

While many college reading and basic writing classes maintain a focus on remediating students' skills (Boylan, 2003; Wyatt, 2003), literacy theory over the past two decades has focused on better understanding the role of language for distinct purposes and in distinct contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 1996; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984; Street & Lefstein,

2007; Szwed, 1981/2001). These theorists have argued that school-based models of language instruction restrict conceptualizations of literacy, too often separating it from the social contexts that give it significance. This *social turn* in literacy holds that within the specialized contexts of school, home, work, church, or even play, it is necessary to examine the distinct *literacy practices* that reflect individuals' ways of using written and spoken language and how those uses reflect social and cultural understanding, historical forces, and individual goals (Gee, 1996).

Although developmental literacy courses often emphasize relatively narrow constructions of correctness in language, the broader literacy practices that college students bring with them to the classroom are influenced by early language learning at home, as well as by common language use in workplaces and the community and may, at any given time, be at odds with school-based notions of what it means to be literate (see especially Gee, 2004; Heath, 1984; Ivanič, 1997). Theories of student resistance (Erickson, 1988; Giroux, 1983) recognize that students are not merely bystanders to these forces, but rather seek to make sense of the choices and challenges that shape the contested cultural landscape of the classroom.

To be sure, not every act of student misbehavior or opposition can or should be construed as a political act, and this framework is not offered as a blanket excuse for student misdeeds or lapses. But as Erickson (1988) argued, resistance theory can offer us a persuasive explanatory tool to examine the issue of the persistent under-preparedness of students, especially those from poor or minority communities, and to thus rethink classroom structure. Resistance theory, Erickson writes, "accounts more comprehensively and realistically for the phenomenon of

massive school failure among the poor than does classical liberal social theory, whose naïve view of school as an unmixed blessing for those deserving poor who are willing to take advantage of the opportunities given them ignores unpleasant facts of life in urban and rural schools with predominantly low SES student populations... [while also avoiding] the problem of crude determinism found in reproduction theory" (1988, p. 221).

Studies of student resistance have dealt most commonly with the school experiences of adolescents who, through compulsory educational mandates, are required to attend secondary schools and who thus may also seek ways to reject some (or many) instructional practices within that prescribed system of schooling. In his ethnographic exploration of academic alienation of British working class youth, for instance, Willis (1977) documented how adolescent boys actively relegated themselves to remaining in the working class by willfully opposing school-based authority and its presumption of social mobility through access to and acquisition of academic credentials.

The notion of resistant adult learners, then, could present something of a contradiction. Unlike secondary (or younger) students, adults are presumed to be able to freely choose whether to participate in postsecondary schooling at all and, within the chosen boundaries of higher education, to make individual choices about courses of study, class attendance, or whether to complete assignments. This narrative of choice and participation in postsecondary schooling suggest ideas of academic freedom and relationships between adult student and adult instructor that function in a neutral way to meet shared goals. Indeed, the very idea of resistant adult learners seems, at first blush, to be fundamentally at odds

with the voluntary nature of formal education after high school.

Several points, however, work against this popular conception of postsecondary schooling as fully voluntary and help to illustrate how adult students who may choose enrollment and pursuit of higher education may also oppose or reject specific tasks or acts within that context. For example, enrollment in developmental college-level literacy courses is rarely voluntary; students typically find themselves in basic college reading or composition courses based on placement tests or required writing samples, not of their own volition (Boylan, 2003). Even the decision to enroll in higher education generally has become, for many students, less about individual choice and interest than it is about their perceptions of a college degree as a requirement for accessing the workplace.

Perhaps just as importantly, when developmental students do reach the college classroom, they often find the patterns of earlier K-12 literacy learning repeated, with the teacher in the position of authority and the students as required to adjust their existing literacies to the Academy's language and literacy practices (Alvermann, 2001; Quigley, 1992). Ivanič (1997) writes that, in many cases, adult students are "outsiders to the literacies they have to control in order to be successful in higher education [and struggle with] their mixed desire for and resistance to insider status" (p. 68). As college students adapt their existing language practices to the new setting of higher education, they do not simply learn new literacies but, in fact, must create and reproduce these language practices based not only on new social and cultural constructs but also on their previous understandings and exposure (Gee, 1996; Ivanič, 1997).

In this way, acts of resistance on

the part of older students can be seen as a kind of literacy practice, carried forward from earlier exposure to schooling and learning, which has served to shape their individual student identity. Barton and Hamilton (2000) suggest that literacy practices "are more usefully understood as existing in the relations between people, within groups and communities, rather than as a set of properties residing in individuals" (p. 8). The student who has struggled to reconcile home-based language with school-based notions of correct usage, then, does not easily relinquish suspicion about the inherent usefulness of academic English simply because he or she has moved to the new context of the college classroom.

Classroom Practice: Listening to Resistance

In working with developmental students in college-level reading and basic writing courses, it quickly becomes evident that these same students viewed as "struggling" with basic language skills often happen to be rather canny readers of the classroom context. Within that context, they frequently encounter little that aligns with their own perceived notions of the value of schooling and of literacy. Recounting his own experiences as a student placed (and later removed) from vocational tracking in a Los Angeles high school, Rose (1989) recalls fellow students—echoes of the disenfranchised teenagers in Willis's study—who wisely sized up the offered curriculum and chose to check out. Rose calls the response a powerful defense, one that "neutralizes the insult and the frustration of being a vocational kid and, when perfected, it drives teachers up the wall, a delightful secondary effect. But like all strong magic, it exacts a price" (p. 28).

In the developmental reading and writing classes I teach, I have seen students who check out silently and those who register their resistance loudly. "How

many of these classes do I have to take before I get to *real* classes," complained one student placed in a developmental reading course before she could begin work toward a nursing degree. It is a familiar refrain. Students often volunteer that they see little usefulness in mandatory assignments requiring them to practice textbook note-taking or reproduce formal English grammar structures. In rejecting classroom notions of literacy, they explicitly align themselves outside of school-based ways of using language: "I don't read," comes one familiar echo; "I'm not really a writer," comes another. Student ambivalence about school-sponsored literacies is commonly perceived as individual failure, laziness, or surrender.

Giroux (1983) suggests that while not all resistant behavior should be considered a cultural or political act, all forms of oppositional behavior should be examined and weighed against the social, cultural, and political forces from which it emerges. It is perhaps easy to assess the underprepared college student only as lacking or fighting against maturity under the labels (both self- and school-assigned) of "not a reader" or "not a writer," but that fails to consider fully how they might see their role as meaning-makers in the classroom.

When my student, Deborah, rejected class discussion of the assigned memoir *The Glass Castle* in our reading course with the candid announcement, "I ain't reading that book," her response invited consideration of whether her opposition to the text could reflect a cultural or political position to the literacy practices of the classroom. Deborah was in her late 20s, interested in pursuing classes in medical billing procedures, and, at roughly the mid-point of the term, had attended class consistently and performed well on most course assignments. Her sharp opposition to the memoir, along with silent cues from other listless students, caused me to rethink how the class was making meaning of the text in the course.

As a model for reconsidering the

meaning of Deborah's blunt rejection of the book, I turned to Henry's (1995) account of reshaping her teaching strategies to ease student resistance in a required college-level reading course and her efforts to expand students' view of themselves as readers. In her college reading course, Henry adopted a reading workshop format after recognizing her own students' frustrations—and ultimate rejection, she argues—with the same kind of traditional approaches to literacy skills instruction that the students themselves recognized as having failed them in previous school experiences. Students told Henry (1995) that reading “sucked” (p. 1); roughly half reported that they never read for pleasure and almost a third of agreed with the statement “I feel hostility toward people who read a lot” (p. 21). Her students, Henry writes, “had seen a ‘member’s only’ sign somewhere and were feeling kind of cranky about it. . . . For some, it may have felt more clean to reject those who devalued them than to assimilate dishonestly, regardless of the consequences” (Henry, 1995, p. 22).

Using resistance theory as a support, Henry retooled her skills-based college reading course to function as a reading workshop, one in which students could select materials relevant to their own experiences. Students wrote letters to Henry as instructor and to one another, offering analysis of their self-selected materials. This classroom structure, which allowed students to select readings based on their own interests and to frame their own responses to those texts, lessened student resistance to classroom-based literacy practices and permitted greater access to the structures of postsecondary schooling on their own terms.

After Deborah's rejection of *The Glass Castle* in my own classroom, I decided to invite students to similarly reframe their interaction with the text by shaping their own final assignment on the reading. I first asked students to discuss possible ways of summing up their experience reading the text. This invitation to shape their own response shifted the student's positioning, and they offered a range of

new responses to the reading and how they could demonstrate those responses for a cumulative assessment. Two students ventured they were unsure how to sum up the text because this happened to be the first book they had ever read completely. Another student said she had been hesitant to talk about the book in classroom discussions because she was not sure she was getting the “right answers.” Students wondered aloud if it was okay to write about their reactions to the author's dysfunctional family based on their own family troubles. After weeks of awkward, halting instructor-directed discussions, the relationship between adult students and adult instructor was recalibrated in this conversation, with the students ultimately creating a final writing assignment in which they would rank the book on a one-to-ten scale and then defend their rating with support from the text and their own responses to it.

The power dynamics of the classroom are central in considering how resistance theory might inform postsecondary literacy instruction. In the context of primary and secondary schooling, resistance theory assumes an inherent imbalance of power due not only to the compulsory nature of K-12 schooling but also the cultural construct of the adult-to-child relationship (Giroux, 1983; Willis, 1977). Postsecondary students, however, are presumed to face a more equal power structure in the classroom as adults (or emerging adults) voluntarily working with adult instructors. Still, traditional student-instructor power structures often remain in play, driven not only by grades and assignments but also by the notion of the instructor as having “better” ways of knowing. This dynamic may be particularly prevalent in developmental literacy courses, where students are required to enroll in reading or basic writing classes based on institutional assessments that they somehow do not fully belong in the college classroom yet and by the skills-based curricula that often echoes the patterns of language learning from earlier schooling.

Ivanič (1997) suggests that students

and instructors in the college setting should not be automatically relegated to those traditional roles, arguing that “a critical view of discourse communities [including the classroom] brings to the fore the power relations, the struggles, and the possibility of change within them and among them” (p. 83). In recognizing and attempting to work *with* resistance, teachers can learn to usefully question assumptions of their own power and superiority of knowledge and to recognize their sometimes limited understanding of students' lives within and beyond the classroom.

As the term concluded in the developmental reading course in which students had taken ownership of their final writing assignment for *The Glass Castle*, 14 of 15 students submitted the paper rating the text and supporting their determination. Average ratings hovered around a seven, although the students indicated in their writing that they felt free to challenge the text. “I give this book a zero,” one student wrote. “I do this because I did not like the book, and I did not like being required to read it for this class.” As for Deborah, whose harsh judgment had prompted my rethinking of the required text and, ultimately, the class involvement in shaping the assessment, her opposition had softened. “As you know, I stopped reading this book for a while. I didn't see where it was going, and I didn't know why it mattered,” she wrote. “But then I started reading it a little more, and I came back around to it.” In this small way, the act of listening to resistance in the classroom helped this student find a way to re-engage with a fairly standard school-based literacy practice. The final writing assignment, with its focus determined by the students, did not require them to suspend their existing identities even as it allowed them to continue shifting their sense of themselves as readers, students, and makers of meaning.

Discussion and Implications

Recognizing resistance in the literacy classroom opens the door to some

complicated questions. In one sense, acknowledging resistance in schooling at any level is to acknowledge failure, not only by students who have chosen to turn away from conventional school literacies, but also by schools and teachers who have failed to find effective ways to help students to expand and rewrite their classroom experiences (Moje, 2000). Openly discussing questions of how and why some students might choose to oppose school-based language practices challenges popular notions of schools as democratic levelers that allow all students equally to acquire the literacy practices of the dominant culture.

Ultimately though, the recognition of resistance may be more liberating for students than attempts to quietly subvert it. This approach understands, as Giroux (1993) argues, the role of resistance and human agency as central elements in transforming learning and critical thinking. He writes that “schools will not change society, but we can create in them pockets of resistance that provide pedagogical models for new forms of learning and social relations—forms which can be used in other spheres more directly involved in the struggle for a new morality and view of social justice” (Giroux, 1983, p. 293). In the post-secondary classroom, resistance should be recognized as an inevitable response at some point of mature students who are attempting to acquire the language ways of the Academy and of their professional interests—all of which may very well be in conflict, as noted by Ivanić (1997), with the language practices and sense of identity that students bring to the classroom.

This is perhaps particularly true in the case of those students designated as developmental learners and required to take basic writing or academic reading courses based on perceived deficiencies in literacy skills. As a group, students who comprise developmental literacy courses on 2-year and 4-year college campuses defy broad generalizations, but recent research has shown that the population in

developmental courses is one in which students who are poor or from minority communities are disproportionately represented (Boylan, 2003). Students who often have had the least access to formal English conventions or school-structured literacy practices can thus find themselves alienated again within the postsecondary system, just out of reach of the “real classes.” Student impressions of themselves as “not a reader” or “not a writer” (Alvermann, 2001) persist and may be strengthened or reinforced by placement in developmental courses.

That students would signal resistance should not surprise. By recognizing and examining how the cycle of school mis-preparedness can be located within the actions and interactions of students and teachers, however, educators can begin to rethink how those patterns form and are carried from the experiences of K-12 schooling to postsecondary education. In the critical pedagogy articulated by Shor and Freire (1987), student resistance to this cycle is countered with an invitation to reshape the classroom experience, from discussion structure to texts selected to assignments completed. Students, in this classroom construct, are asked to become critical readers not only of the texts and materials that they will encounter in their college courses but of the postsecondary context more broadly.

By listening to resistance and acknowledging schools as places of social, cultural, and political contest rather than sites of colonization, educators can create authentic space for human agency in the teaching and learning transaction. Recognizing the sources of student opposition can lead to the development of a critical pedagogy, one that works to ensure that student voices are part of a broader classroom exchange about political, cultural, and historical social structures (Giroux, 1983; Shor & Freire, 1987). In the context of the postsecondary literacy classroom, allowing resistance to shape classroom discourse ultimately may offer a bridge across the perceived readiness gap.

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