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If Meaning Is Constructed, What Is It Made From? Toward a Cultural Theory of Reading

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This essay explores the notion of meaning, particularly as applied to acts of producing and reading texts. The analysis is grounded in principles of activity theory and cultural semiotics and focuses on the ways in which reading takes place among readers and texts in a culturally mediated, codified experience characterized here as the “transactional zone.” The author builds on Vygotsky’s work to argue that meaning comes through a reader’s generation of new texts in response to the text being read. As a means of accounting for this phenomenon, examples are provided from studies illustrating, for instance, Vygotsky’s zones of meaning, the dialogic role of composing during a reading transaction, and the necessity of culturally constructed subjectivity in meaning construction. The author concludes by locating meaning in the transactional zone in which signs become tools for extending or developing concepts and the richness of meaning coming from the potential of a reading transaction to generate new texts.

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.” (Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass)

In discussions of readers and texts, it is common to refer to the importance of the text’s meaning to the reader. Axiomatic to the point that it has become a theoretical bromide, the idea that texts should be meaningful is rarely defined. Rather, it is assumed to be not only a property of a worthwhile reading experience but a concept that all reading theorists and practitioners understand in more or less the same way. In this article, I would like to focus on the axiom itself; that is, my goal is to consider what it means to mean.

Defining the term *meaningful* turns out to be a precarious and often circular proposition, as my previous sentence and Humpty Dumpty’s pronouncement might suggest. Merriam-Webster (1994–1996) defines *meaningful* as “full of meaning.” *Meaning* is defined variously as “something that is meant,” “the thing that is conveyed,” and “a significant quality.” *Mean* means “to serve or intend to convey, show, or indicate: signify.” The best I can gather from these everyday definitions of meaningfulness is that when something has meaning, it stands for something else.

This notion of meaning does not quite get at the depths of consciousness suggested by references to meaningfulness by those who write about textual meaning.

Bruner (1986), for instance, states that in a meaningful reading of literature, one engages in “world making” that is

constrained by the nature of the world version with which we begin the remaking. It is not a relativistic picnic. . . . In the end, it is the transaction of meaning by human beings, human beings armed with reason and buttressed by the faith that sense can be made and remade, that makes human culture. . . . Literature subjunctivizes, makes strange, renders the obvious less so, the unknowable less so as well, matters of value more open to reason and intuition. Literature, in this spirit, is an instrument of freedom, lightness, imagination, and yes, reason. It is our only hope against the long gray night. (pp. 158–159)

This is quite a more impressive enterprise than simply standing for something else. In this article, I aim to propose what is involved when readers engage with texts in such a way as to produce these transactions and transformations. Fundamental to this process, I argue, is the reader’s creation of new texts during the process of reading. This process of text production conceivably involves additional reflection through which the reader potentially produces further texts. The reader’s construction of these new texts is the source of meaning in reading. These constructions, while idiosyncratic, are culturally mediated, locating meaning not only in the reader and text but in the cultural history that has preceded and conditioned both, in the social practices that provide the immediate environment of reading, in the power relationships inherent to social participation, and in the relational experiences that make up the reader’s life narrative. I next detail the processes I am describing and then illustrate them with examples from studies I have conducted on the meaning-making experiences of high school students.

Theoretical Framework for Considering Meaning

To help frame my inquiry, I draw primarily on the concepts and terminology of the related fields of *activity theory* and *semiotics*. Because activity theory is cross disciplinary and ecumenical, any approach that derives from it relies both on its progenerative theorists (e.g., Cole, 1996; Engeström, 1999; Leont’ev, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978, 1987) and on complementary perspectives, whether they claim an activity theory orientation or not. In particular, I rely on the notions of *tool* and *sign* to describe what a *text* is and how a reader constructs meaning through joint activity with the text and other mediators. I rely further on the notion of *culture* as both the primogenitor of signs and tools and the product of sign and tool use. Culture, from this perspective, provides the basis for meaning, serving to mediate the development of what Vygotsky (1978) called *higher mental processes*. Higher mental processes are paradigmatic rather than universal; that is, they represent ways of comprehending and acting on the world that are appropriated through cultural practice, and they therefore embody cultural concepts of what and how things signify (Kress, 2000a). Although I treat each of them separately in the sections that follow, it is impossible for any to exist independently of the others.

Sign

I borrow Eco’s (1985) paraphrase of Peirce (1931–1958) as the basis for my understanding of a sign: To Eco, a sign is a “relation or referring back,

where . . . something stands to somebody for something else in some respect or capacity” (p. 176). This notion appears quite simple, yet as the abundant field of semiotics suggests, it is instead quite complex. What the sign, or configuration of signs—what I call a text—stands for resides at the heart of the notion of meaning, since a sign has different meanings for different readers. At the same time, a sign can mean nothing to a reader for whom the configuration has no codified cultural significance, in which case it is not a sign. Signs, in this conception, are not restricted to language but are, in Kress’s (2000b) terms, *multimodal*; that is, they include “the full range of semiotic modes in use in a particular society” (p. 183; cf. Gardner, 1983; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Suhor, 1984; Whitin, 1996).

To give an example from a recent debate in the United States: The Confederate army battle flag flew for many years above the state capitol building of South Carolina and, following a protest movement and economic boycott, was moved to the capitol building grounds. The flag’s arrangement of the St. Andrews cross and stars was until recently central to the design of the state flag of Georgia and was recently reaffirmed as part of the state flag of Mississippi. This particular configuration, in the view of many white natives of these states, is a symbol of veneration for Confederate Civil War veterans, as South Carolina Senator Glen McConnell explained in a July 26, 1999, *Nightline* feature:

I see honor, courage, valor. I see the red, white, and blue and the blood of sacrifice that ran through that battle and the people that carried that flag. I don’t see black and white. . . . People say it’s an emblem of racism, it’s an emblem of hate, it’s shameful and all of this. How do they think we feel when it’s the emblem of our ancestors? They hurt our feelings.

This same flag was viewed quite differently by an unidentified black South Carolinian interviewed for the *Nightline* program, who said, “When I see the flag I see oppression. I see segregation. I see slavery and all of the things that are a disadvantage to the Afro-American people.” A second black citizen echoed these remarks, saying, “It represented the worst in America. And most decent Americans don’t want to see as a symbol the worst in America. We want to see the best in America” (<http://www.jessejacksonjr.org/issues/i07269968.html>).

For the purpose of contrast, I will add some hypothetical readers of the Confederate battle flag. One would be a resident of a remote Indonesian island who has no knowledge of the flag’s significance in American history. This person might not read the flag as meaningful at all, might assign a purely astronomical meaning to its arrangement of stars, or might see it as a possible sail for a fishing boat. Other hypothetical readers would be the meteorologist or kite flier for whom the flag flying atop the state capitol might take on at least a temporary alternative meaning, that being as evidence of which way the wind is blowing.

When considering the meaning that any individual attributes to a text, it is important to note that the text is not interpreted alone, but in terms of the context in which it appears. My notion of context is necessarily relational, following from its Latin root. The word *text* derives from *texere*, meaning to weave; *context* comes from the Latin terms *contextus*, meaning connection of words or coherence, and *contextere*, meaning to weave together (Merriam-Webster, 1994–1996). In this sense, context is viewed as a relationship among people or artifacts and their environments, which typically include multiple sets of overlapping goals, values,

discourses, tools, and other residue of social life (Cole, 1996; Lave, Murtaugh, & de la Rocha, 1984; Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 2000).

To return to the example of the Confederate battle flag: To some readers, the flag loses a degree of its emotional impact when removed from atop the capitol dome and interred behind glass in a museum. The relational view of context is critical here, suggesting the importance of the kinds of relationships a person establishes both historically and immediately and how they affect the person's understanding of signs and texts. Senator McConnell and those for whom he speaks undoubtedly have ancestors for whom the flag indeed represented valor; some (e.g., Gee, 1990) would surely argue that McConnell is also attempting to authorize, conserve, and perpetuate the societal and political power that the flag has historically provided for him and his constituents.

On the other hand, other South Carolinians who shared McConnell's general cultural background supported the removal of the flag from the state capitol, some arguing for the more radical complete removal from the capitol grounds and others for the compromise position of relocating it to a ground-level display. The presence of these multiple perspectives suggests both the likelihood that individuals participate in multiple sets of cultural practices and the presence of what Fine (1987) calls *idiocultures*, that is, cultures-within-cultures in which cultural practices, values, and goals differ in some degree from those that govern the culture as a whole.

A written text too can take on different meanings depending on the context, as Fish (1980) revealed when a class of college students, upon entering a literature class and seeing a list of words left on the chalkboard from a previous class, assumed it must be a poem and interpreted it as such. I have chosen the example of the Confederate battle flag for my opening illustration because of its familiarity and clear diversion of interpretation. My purpose is not to assign a correct meaning to the flag¹ but to illustrate the ambiguity and indeterminacy of signs to readers, if not necessarily to authors. It is notable that each of the first two real readers of the Confederate battle flag I quoted believes that he has an authoritative interpretation of the sign of the flag. In 1999, however, the interpretation of the flag as a symbol of honor was the official meaning, at least as sanctioned by the governments of these three states. That one group can institute a particular meaning for the flag illustrates the way in which dominant cultures have the power to define their version of reality as reality, thus establishing their values as authoritative and sovereign (Apple, 1979; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gee, 1990; Taxel, 1981; Williams, 1977) and as the framework for future relationships.

This notion that meaning can be sanctioned by those with the greatest cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1994) has implications for the ways in which I will eventually talk about the meaning of texts. In addition to being subjective, constructed, variable, and idiosyncratic, different readings and reading positions have material and discursive, social and cultural consequences for readers. Different kinds of readings in specific settings provide a reader with kinds of capital that can be used along with other kinds of resources for political leverage and power over less knowledgeable readers, as well as speakers and other text users in the different social and institutional fields where readings are made to count. That is, different readings count differently with differential kinds of force and power for individual readers and for interpretive communities. This capital is not simply an acquisition or means of *entrée* but a protean aspect of social positioning and relationships, one that read-

ers can bring to bear to produce a reading, itself invested with capital and contributing to people's power in ongoing relationships across the fields of schools, workplaces, civic life, and other arenas in which reading provides advantage.²

How a sign comes to mean is a function of how a reader is enculturated to read. This fact of enculturation is characteristic of all reading, whether of flags, words, or other texts. Indeed, the idea that characters on a page constitute words to be read is something that one is enculturated to realize and act upon. One belief that I will challenge is the notion that a text has a meaning of its own—the *meaning incarnate* referred to by Bruner (1986)—independent of what readers as members of cultures and participants in relationships bring to it. I will argue that attributing meaning to the text alone simply assigns to the text an officially sanctioned meaning, often one so deeply presumed that other interpretations inevitably are dismissed as incorrect or irrelevant.

Text

A text is a configuration of signs. As my illustration of the text of the Confederate battle flag suggests, I regard reading as an act conducted in conjunction with texts of all kinds, regardless of modality. And as the etymologies of text and context suggest, I regard text and context as interwoven, a relationship to which Witte (1992) would add *intertext*, a term identifying the historical connections among texts, and to which Floriani (1993) would add *intercontext*, a term identifying connections among recurring social practices; I discuss these terms in greater detail later. The act of reading further involves an act of *composition* (Smagorinsky, 1995a). My notion of composing a meaningful text is similar to the New London Group's (1996) concept of *design*, which involves any semiotic activity that consists of "a creative application and combination of conventions . . . that, in the process of Design, transforms at the same time it reproduces these conventions" (p. 74). Reading is thus a constructive act done in conjunction with mediating texts and the cultural-historical context in which reading takes place.

A text refers to any configuration of signs that provides a potential for meaning. A reader, while including those who read written texts, refers more broadly to anyone who tries to make sense of a configuration of signs. These signs would include both deliberately inscribed efforts to orchestrate signs into a text (e.g., a painting) and those that are perceived as being inscribed as a text (e.g., constellations as read by ancient people). In this latter example, the text is presumed to have an author (a god) whose astronomical text is codified in ways that enabled ancient readers to read a meaning into it. Between scientifically observable (constellations) and intentionally inscribed (books) texts on the referential continuum are belief systems such as transcendentalism, in which physical world observations are regarded as appearances of reflections of the spirit, with "absolute truth" accessible through reason and intuition about the spiritual meaning of experience in the material world as revealed through the presumably codified arrangement of natural phenomena.

This point brings me to the assertion that texts, like the cultural-historical contexts in which they are produced and read, are codified and conventional (Rabinowitz, 1987; Rabinowitz & Smith, 1997). A text is produced as part of the ongoing development of a genre—which includes both text features and social practices—and is read by a reader who is enculturated to understand texts in codified and conventional ways (Bakhtin, 1981; Gee, 1990; Kress, 1990). This

reliance on historically evolving conventions contributes to a text's position in an intertext: the juxtaposition of texts in ways that allow for connection and continuity across readings through a relationship of codes and concepts (e.g., Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993; Fairclough, 2000; Hartman, 1992; Witte, 1992). When authors and readers invoke the same codes and thus are in tune with one another's ways of understanding text, they have achieved what Nystrand (1986) calls *reciprocity*. As the illustration of constellations reveals, there can be a kind of reciprocity between readers and texts that is based on a false premise about the codification of texts.³

This spurious reciprocity can take place with readers of written texts such as Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," a pamphlet he distributed in which he argued that British society could solve two problems at once—a proliferation of babies born to the poor and a shortage of food—if the wealthy were to eat young children born into poverty. As Booth (1974) would argue, there is widespread consensus that the ironic and satiric codes of Swift's essay should be read to supersede the argumentative codes. If a reader overlooked the ironic and satiric codes of the text, he or she would read it as a genuine endorsement of neonatophagia (for an online version of this text, see <http://www.worldwideschool.org/library/books/lit/drama/AModestProposal/Chap1.html>).

The contexts of reading can invoke particular conventions for reading, what Durst (1999) calls the "ground rules" for participating appropriately. Marshall, Smagorinsky, and Smith (1995), for instance, have found that, in particular classrooms, teachers emphasize specific reading conventions and discourage others, invoking a traditional, teacher-directed *speech genre* (Bakhtin, 1986; Wertsch, 1991) for discussing literature. The conventions that they impose are grounded in particular traditions of understanding and talking about texts, with the conventions that accompany those traditions potentially modified as instantiated with particular groups of participants. The conventions that teachers endorse and reinforce take on the kind of official authority that interpretations of flags can achieve; that is, they have official sanction and therefore render other ways of reading texts less authoritative and thus less likely to be adopted by novice readers or readers without the capital to vigorously invoke other conventions that might have authority in other settings (Fairclough, 1989, 1992; Gee, 1992).

Furthermore, like an ax murderer in a logging camp, some readers do not recognize the proper use of the tools at hand and can disrupt the official language of discussion by using them for different purposes. And so, in classrooms, idiosyncratic or unconventional readings and uses of language, such as those used for emotional purposes, are often dismissed as irrelevant to understanding a text's meaning. To those who assume that canonical works are written according to an innately superior set of codes, texts produced through other conventions—such as works by some minority writers—are viewed as inferior and not worthy of serious study (see Stotsky, 1999, for an endorsement of this view and Gates, 1988, and Lee, 2000, for a critique). If it is true that there are cultured (Lee, 1993) and gendered (Cherland, 1994; Luke, 1996; Walkerdine, 1986) ways of reading and producing texts, and that some of these practices are out of step with the established and authoritative ways of conceiving and considering texts in school, then school becomes a much more hospitable and rewarding experience for some groups than for others.

Tool

The next notion I take up is that of a tool. A tool is a means by which one acts on one's environment. In the words of Luria (1928), "instead of applying directly its natural function to the solution of a particular task, the child *puts between that function and the task a certain auxiliary means . . .* by the medium of which the child manages to perform the task" (p. 495; cited in Cole, 1996, p. 108). Most readers will instantiate, upon hearing the word *tool*, such implements of handiwork as hammers and saws. From the perspective of activity theory, a tool includes psychological tools as well, particularly speech (Cole, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978, 1987; Wertsch, 1985, 1991) and, as I will argue from my own work, multimodal media such as art, drama, and dance (O'Donnell & Smagorinsky, 1999; Smagorinsky, 1995a, 1997a, 1997b, 1999; Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1994, 1995a, 1995b; Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 1998a, 1998b, 2000). Just as the same sign may represent different meanings to different readers or no meaning at all to other readers, the same implement may serve as a different tool for different users, no tool at all for other users, or a different tool for the same user in different situations, depending on how (or if at all) it is conceptualized. The manner in which it is conceptualized is a function of culture, the next term that requires definition.

Culture

By culture I refer to the recurring social practices and their artifacts that give order, purpose, and continuity to social life. The notion of having a reasonably common purpose suggests that culture is teleological (Wertsch, 2000); that is, culture is motivated by movement toward a shared optimal outcome or ideal destination. This ideal embodies the mutual values of the community in question. Movement toward that ideal is enabled and constrained by recurring social practices that are facilitated by tools that produce the artifacts, including texts, that provide a reasonably shared meaning for life within the culture. As the Confederate battle flag issue illustrates, societies often consist of people of different and frequently conflicting cultures whose experiences and social practices result in cultural icons being interpreted in different ways.

People are, in this sense, products of culture. I do not use this phrase in a fatalistic way that deprives individuals within a culture of agency. Rather, I use it to describe general social practices that become deeply ingrained. At times, a culture's more experienced members will instruct its novices in ways that are didactic and deliberate, such as the way in which a community of faith provides an explicit account of its beliefs about history and destiny to its youngsters and converts. At other times, the means of mediation are subtle to the point of becoming invisible through a process that Cole (1996) calls *prolepsis*. Wells (1986), without using the term, describes the process of prolepsis as follows:

As mature members of a human culture, parents have quite specific ideas about what sorts of behavior have meaning and so, in interpreting the baby's gestures, noises, and so on, parents assimilate them to behaviors that they themselves find meaningful. The meanings attributed are therefore *cultural* meanings and, in their responses, parents provide culturally appropriate feedback that has the effect of shaping the infant's behavior towards what is culturally acceptable and meaningful. (p. 35)

An example of how prolepsis works comes from Rubin, Provezano, and Luria (1974), who studied adults interacting with babies in a nursery. Those babies wearing pink diapers were treated sweetly and gently, while those wearing blue were bounced more robustly. The social future of these infants was thus projected into their current treatment, in turn making that outcome more likely. The process of prolepsis is thus tied to what Wertsch (1985; cf. Leont'ev, 1981) has described as the *motive* of a setting, which implies a purpose and sense of direction for a social group toward which behavior within the setting is channeled through cultural practices.

Through this process, society perpetuates its practices and truisms, at times to the detriment or limitation to some groups within it, such as nonheterosexuals residing in Southern Baptist communities adhering to the doctrine that "Christians should oppose . . . all forms of sexual immorality, including . . . homosexuality" (Rogers, 1999). As stated by Cole (1996), "when neonates enter the world they are already the objects of adult, culturally conditioned interpretation. . . . They come bathed in the concepts their community holds about babies just as surely as they come bathed in amniotic fluid" (pp. 183–184). My notion that people are products of culture, then, refers to the ways in which society embeds its assumptions in daily social practice, thus codifying the world in particular ways and suggesting the naturalness, appropriateness, and often inevitableness of conventional ways of living within it. The world thus coded typically establishes authoritative ways of reading meaning into signs that privilege one perspective over another (cf. Kalantzis & Cope, 2000; Luke, 1988; Michaels & Sohmer, 2000; Street, 1984).

For my purposes as an observer of schools, and especially English classes, prolepsis works in service of the traditional culture of school in which canonical texts make up the curriculum and the analytical written text is prized as the highest form of interpretation (Applebee, 1993). These cultural practices, facilitated by a limited tool kit of mediational means used to produce a limited set of textual forms, restrict students in terms of the meaning available for them to construct. Furthermore, because the cultural practices drawn on most resemble those found in the homes of middle-class students, school success is less likely for those whose home cultures provide them with a different tool kit, a different set of goals for learning, and different notions of what counts as an appropriate text (Cazden, 1988; Heath, 1983; Lee, 1993; Moll & Greenberg, 1990).

The Transactional Zone of Meaning Construction

I next employ these concepts from activity theory and semiotics to explore the notion of meaning in reading. One caveat to my argument is that the database that supports it is drawn from studies of high school students reading the genre known as literature, that is, texts codified to imply rather than explicate a meaning. The limitations of my research focus might call into question the broad applicability of my conception of reading to texts designed to explicate a meaning, such as the article I am now writing. To clarify my own view of how broadly one could generalize from my argument, I would say that it ought to apply to the reading of any text for which a reader generates a new text, regardless of genre. For some readers, this rule might exclude literature (Wilhelm, 1996); for others, it might include the most perspicuous of technical reports.

I would like to start with the premise that meaning emerges through a reader's joint activity with mediating tools and signs, among them the signs of a text. I am

not entirely distinguishing readers from texts, an idea that I develop throughout this essay. In one sense, a human reader and a text such as a book are distinct and constituted from quite different elements. It is not, however, physical people and physical texts that I am talking about, but rather meaning as a function of what Salomon (1993) has called *distributed cognitions*, in which “people . . . think in conjunction or partnership with others and with the help of culturally provided tools and implements” (p. xiii), including texts. In this sense, as Wertsch (1991) argues, the mind “‘extends beyond the skin’ in at least two senses: it is often socially distributed and it is connected to the notion of mediation” (p. 14; cf. Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Bateson, 1972; Geertz, 1973; Smagorinsky, 1995b).

Just as the mind extends beyond the confines of the skin, textual signs extend beyond the cover of a book. During a reading transaction, reader and text conjoin in an experiential space (cf. Faust, 2000). This space provides the arena in which cultural mediation takes place, including the act known as reading. I view this space not as a sealed area connecting two discrete entities but as a dynamic, permeable zone whose instrumentality is a function of culture. The experience that takes place in the space I am describing is thus a joint accomplishment, not just of readers and texts but of the cultural practices through which both have been produced and through which the two become engaged. In this sense, meaning is a function of work conducted among readers and texts rather than between reader and text. By this I mean that no text or reader comes to the experience alone; rather, reading is fundamentally relational and *dialogic*, a term I use in Bakhtin’s (1981) sense, that is, in dialogue with cultural predecessors whose practices take place within the “great historical destinies of genres” (p. 259). Furthermore, the text becomes situated among a host of related mediational means through which its meaning potential may be realized: speech genres, social transactions with other readers, cultural schemas, and so on. The text is thus the focal but not sole tool through which meaning emerges for a reader.

Among the critical contexts for readers is their storehouse of prior narratives from personal experience, including previous readings. Reading is thus “emplotted” (Ricoeur, 1983), that is, situated in dialogue with and in extension of other readings. Wertsch (1999) has documented how text production is emplotted in terms of its hidden dialogicality (Bakhtin, 1984) among narrative texts: Each text is produced as a conversational turn in dialogue with prior and anticipated future texts regardless of whether or not they are acknowledged. I would argue that readings are similarly emplotted, serving as what Ricoeur calls a *configurational act* enabling readers to bring together diverse texts into a complex whole. Different readings of the same text thus vary, not just from reader to reader but from reading to reading by the same reader, depending on how each reading is emplotted and configured within the reader’s experience. From a pedagogical standpoint, it behooves educators to understand the narratives within which students emplot new readings so as to make better sense of their interpretations and help them gain access to new narratives that will provide them with additional mediators through which to experience new texts.

The notion of reading I have briefly outlined here departs from conceptions of reading in which meaning inheres in the text itself, with the reader’s role being to decipher that embedded meaning. This is not to say that texts are not inscribed with meaning or that they do not preclude some readings or suggest relatively narrow

possibilities. I am hoping, for instance, that readers of the text I am now writing do not conclude that it is about the mating habits of the snail darter or, more topically, about the location of meaning in the text itself. Indeed, among my goals as a writer is to preclude such readings by writing carefully within conventions anticipated by the readers I envision. My choice of words, codes, and conventions is designed to inscribe meaning into the text, although it is also possible that I am inscribing meanings that I am not aware of, as writers do when using masculine pronouns and other gendered terms when referring to people generally.

My premise is that, as a writer, I produce a text that provides a meaning potential realized by different readers in different ways (cf. Nystrand's, 1986, critique of Olson's, 1978, notion of the autonomous text). In addition to whatever deciphering or decoding might be required to understand what I am trying to inscribe in the text, readers bring to the experience a host of attributes and conditions that will affect how they engage with this inscription. In an important sense, then, readers do not simply decode texts; rather, they encode texts through activity in the transactional zone.⁴

This engagement with textual codes takes place both with individual words and with the configuration of conventions that make up genres (Bakhtin, 1986); that is, the text as a whole is codified in ways that suggest that I am producing an argument and not a work of fiction, a distinction that should invoke a particular approach to reading by those who understand these codes and know how to adjust their reading appropriately (Rabinowitz, 1987). To return to my previous statement that readers and texts are products of culture: Argumentation is a cultural construct that is deliberately codified and conventional, requiring my text to work within those codes if it is to be recognized and read as such. Readers whose life experiences have exposed them to argumentation or whose schooling has given them formal knowledge of argumentative conventions will use their knowledge to inform their reading, to engage in the social practice of argumentation during their transaction with the text. This is not to say that they will agree with my argument, only to recognize that I am arguing and not producing a satire.

It is also important to note that multiple codes may coexist in the same text. Swift's "A Modest Proposal," for instance, employs the codes of argumentation but also those of irony. Readers who recognize the argumentative codes but not the ironic will see a single rather than double entendre of the essay. At times, the use of double coding is deliberately embedded so that only knowledgeable readers can see both meanings. For instance, American slaves employed multiple coding systems in spirituals, quilts, and other seemingly mundane texts for conveying messages and instructions on escape tactics and routes along the Underground Railroad (Tobin & Dobard, 1999). One quilt pattern known as the "trip around the world [was] used to indicate a path around a mountain instead of over it . . . if anyone—overseer, master, or mistress—overheard the slaves talking about taking a trip around the world, they would have dismissed it as gibberish" (p. 84). Unlike Jonathan Swift, who (I assume) assumed the ability of his readers to recognize the double entendre, the slaves designed their quilts to exclude particular readings and readers through the embedding of codes grounded in the African cultures brought to the continent by their ancestors.

I would argue that the common invocation of conventions is what enables readers and texts to meet in the transactional zone. As the examples of "A Modest Pro-

posal” and the Underground Railroad signs reveal, readers who lack enculturation to reading codes will not have access to the meaning potential that they are inscribed to suggest. One important point about the construct of a transactional zone is that the meaning potential of a text can be read quite differently by people who read codes according to the same set of conventions. Take, for instance, the illustration of the Confederate battle flag and the different readings provided by the black and white South Carolinians interviewed. I would argue that all are meeting the text in the transactional zone because they are recognizing the same sets of codes; all see the flag as a symbol of the Confederate cause in the Civil War. The fact that some see this cause as glorious and others as shameful is due to factors of perspective and emplotment rather than the recognition of different codes.

The transactional zone would not be in effect for readers of “A Modest Proposal” who either purchase and devour a plump baby or believe that Swift thinks they ought to do so. Such readers only recognize the argumentative codes and thus accept Swift’s claim that “a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee or a ragout.”

The transactional zone is also available through the kind of reading known as *deconstruction*, whose purpose is to reveal the assumptions behind a text, often for critical purposes. Cherryholmes (1988) describes the practice as follows:

In a Foucauldian genre, criticism produces histories and politics of the present, wherein texts and discourse-practices are the effects of the exercise of power. In a Derridean deconstruction, criticism exposes silences and gaps between that which is valued and disvalued, traces the sedimentation of meanings, and documents contradictions and ambiguities within texts and discourse-practices. (p. 160)

The reader’s situation within networks of power and experiences therein—how different forms of capital are brought to bear on a text—produces a reading (which itself is a form of capital), even if that reading might suggest meanings unanticipated and unintended by the author (see, e.g., Tyson, 1999).

I need also to attend to the issues involved when unschooled readers do not recognize textual codes. This lack of recognition and understanding can occur with both words (i.e., sound-letter correspondence) and genres (i.e., whole-text conventions). I would argue that, without knowledge of conventions governing both, meeting a text in the transactional zone is not likely. Some (e.g., Delpit, 1995; Lee, 1993) have argued that explicit instruction in textual codes is necessary in order for readers from outside society’s mainstream to succeed in school. Whether one believes in this approach or the immersion methods of whole language (e.g., Goodman & Goodman, 1990), I would argue that codified resonance between readers and texts is essential to the potential for establishing a transactional zone.

Acultural Accounts of Meaning

My view of reading as inherently cultural is at odds with conceptions of reading that guide much current research, practice, and policy. Many views of reading focus primarily on readers and texts, irrespective of the cultural and contextual factors that I argue are central to a view of reading grounded in activity theory or cultural semiotics. Much of the highly influential reading research of the 1980s (see,

e.g., Anderson, Hiebert, Wilkinson, & Scott, 1985) was based on time-constrained readings of abbreviated passages, with the setting and task ruling out the kinds of discussion-mediated, recursive, deliberative, constructive readings that more typically take place among people whose reading does not serve the purpose of measuring comprehension.

More recently, the conceptions of reading claimed as having scientific validity in the “reading wars” (see Allington & Woodside-Jiron, 1999) are based on research that similarly is conducted in isolated settings. In these conceptions of reading, the text is presumed to have a particular meaning that the reader, under conditions that resemble testing, must decipher. Failure to determine the text’s official meaning results in an assessment of poor reading skills. The text, regardless of its codification or interest to the reader, serves as a sample of all texts in measuring comprehension. The reading is presumed to be representative of all of the reader’s readings, including further readings of the same text perhaps mediated by discussion, reflection, research, inquiry, and other efforts at engaging with the signs of the text—all surely actions that successful readers take when reading difficult texts for their own purposes.

The notion that a text has an authoritative, official meaning also informs standardized tests of verbal aptitude and reading comprehension, which further assume that there are questions most worth asking and answers most worth providing, all of which serve to measure a reader’s ability and often, by inference, a teacher’s competence. A final area in which this assumption prevails is in the commercial literature anthologies that are ubiquitous in secondary schools, which Applebee (1993) has found to discourage open-ended and divergent thinking about how meaning might emerge through reading literature.

Even those who take a more constructivist perspective have argued that reading, including the reading of literature, is solely a function of a reader’s transaction with a text. In such approaches, culture is not viewed as a factor in the way a reader reads. Rather, the notion of a reading transaction is reduced to what takes place when a text comes alive in the mind of an active reader, primarily through the reader’s instantiation of personal experience in response to the words of the text. Probst (1988) goes so far as to argue that readers should resist culture in order to provide the most personal reading possible. I will argue, in contrast, that it is impossible to become acultural as a reader or producer of texts. Rather, one’s notion of meaning emerges through participation in cultural practices; as Moll (2000) has argued, it is inevitable that we live culturally, to which I would add that it is inevitable that we read culturally.

A Cultural Account of Meaning

I next outline what I mean by meaning as necessarily situated in and mediated by culture, particularly in terms of constructing meaning with texts. I include attention to the different zones of meaning, the dialogic role of composing during a reading transaction, the necessity of culturally constructed subjectivity in meaning construction, the role of intertextuality and intercontextuality in the construction of meaning, and the depths and dynamics of context in readers’ engagement with texts. These factors, while treated separately, are deeply interwoven. My presentation is therefore recursive, cycling back frequently to discuss how the constructs are related.

Zones of Meaning

In this section, I discuss what Vygotsky refers to as zones of meaning. The discussion is potentially confusing because of the ways in which Vygotsky's Russian terms have been translated. Vygotsky's (1934) *Myshlenie i rech': Psikhologicheskie issledovaniya* has been translated three times, twice as *Thought and Language* (1962, 1986) and once as *Thinking and Speech* (1987). All three versions have translated two of Vygotsky's key terms in ways that have been called into question (e.g., Matusov, 2000; see XMCA Discussion Listserve, 2000). The Russian term *smysl* has been translated as *sense* (i.e., unarticulated inner speech), while the term *znachenie* has been translated as *meaning* (i.e., the articulation of thought through a sign system such as words). Vygotsky, however, viewed both *smysl* and *znachenie* as constituents of the meaningful whole. I next explain each of these two zones of meaning in greater detail.

Smysl is the set of images and associations one makes with a sign such as a word in the area of consciousness Vygotsky (1987) called *inner speech*, that is, the abbreviated syntax and stream-of-consciousness properties of unarticulated, inchoate thought. *Smysl* corresponds to what Rosenblatt (1978) refers to as the initial zone of meaning in a reader's *evocation*, or what Gallas (2001) refers to as *imagination*. Rosenblatt describes this experience as

a penumbra of "memories" of what has preceded, ready to be activated by what follows, and providing the context from which further meaning will be derived. Awareness—more or less explicit—of repetitions, echoes, resonances, repercussions, linkages, cumulative effects, contrasts, or surprises is the mnemonic matrix for the structuring of emotion, idea, situation, character, plot—in short, for the evocation of a work of art. (pp. 57–58)

Smysl is as yet unarticulated, being instead the storm cloud of thought that produces the shower of words, to use Vygotsky's (1987) metaphor. One great limitation of the concept of *smysl* is that it cannot be empirically demonstrated, only inferred. Vygotsky's formulation of inner speech came from his observations of egocentric speech in young children, which he theorized became internalized as inner speech. Once speech (or another tool) is articulated and thus observable, it appears in the zone of meaning that is the shower of words (or other signs) that Vygotsky calls *znachenie*. *Znachenie*, then, is the zone of meaning available in represented form, corresponding to the notion of a sign, regardless of modality.

Because these two zones compose a meaningful whole, referring to *znachenie* as "meaning" can be misleading. I retain the translation of *sense* for *smysl*: "the aggregate of all the psychological facts that arise in our consciousness as the result of the word. Sense is a dynamic, fluid, and complex formation which has several zones that vary in their stability" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 275). For *znachenie*, I use *articulation*:

It is the most stable, unified, and precise of these zones. In different contexts, a word's sense changes. In contrast, [articulation] is a comparatively fixed and stable point, one that remains constant with all the exchanges of the word's sense that are associated with its use in various contexts. (p. 275)

A reader's association of meaning with a text—and here I refer to the whole of meaning comprising all of its zones—reveals something about the text itself but

also serves as residue of the cultural constructs that are appropriated to provide the reader's frameworks for thinking (Tulviste, 1991). Any concept—and, consequently, any construction of meaning—is thus necessarily located first in culture and second in the mind of the individual. And because the mind extends beyond the skin to include the tools of mediation through which the individual then acts on the environment, the mind of the individual, however distributed, in turn contributes to the evolving culture of the social surround (Smagorinsky, 1995b). Among these mediators are texts themselves, transactions with which can contribute to the worldviews of members of a culture. When these texts presume particular relationships, social hierarchies, and competence levels—such as the masculine orientation of many sacred religious texts—they can inscribe in a society assumptions about the location of authority and power (Luke, 1988; Rabinowitz, 1987).

Concepts and meaning thus have cultural origins. It is quite possible for individuals to resist these cultural conceptions. I would argue, however, that resisting one set of cultural constructs relies on precepts that are appropriated from other cultural constructs. And so, while any individual has the capacity to resist and defy the worldview of any culture, it is not possible to think and act independent of culture; it is not possible to live aculturally (Cole, 1996). From this perspective, texts are composed of signs that themselves are inscribed and codified as cultural artifacts and are read by people whose ways of encoding are conditioned by participation in cultural practice. The transactional zone is available when readers have been enculturated to recognize the codes by which the texts are produced. This is not to say that all readings will subsequently be the same or that texts may signify in only one way, only to say that readers and texts share a cultural cognizance.

The Mediation of Sense Into Articulation

Sense is mediated into an articulation through the use of a psychological tool, often speech, which can serve “as a tool for exploring a subject” and help “generate new ideas ‘at the point of utterance’” (Applebee, 1981, p. 100; cf. Langer & Applebee, 1987). I next illustrate this process with research conducted in an alternative school for recovering substance abusers (for details of the research, see Smagorinsky, 1995a, 1997a, 1999; Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1994, 1995a, 1995b). We studied the composing processes of students who produced artistic interpretations of William Carlos Williams's short story “The Use of Force” (see <http://www.bnl.com/shorts/stories/force.html> for an online version of this story). The story concerns a doctor who narrates an account of a house call he makes during a diphtheria epidemic. The doctor must extract a throat culture from a young girl who has displayed symptoms of the illness. The girl battles him savagely and hysterically to prevent him from examining her throat, and her parents try to help the doctor by holding her down and shaming her into complying. During the course of the struggle, the doctor develops contempt for the parents and passion toward the girl. Against his rational judgment, the doctor becomes lost in “a blind fury” to attack and subdue the girl. In “a final unreasoning assault” he overpowers her and discovers her “secret” of “tonsils covered with membrane.” The story ends with a final act of fury in which the girl attacks the doctor “while tears of defeat [blind] her eyes.”

One of the students we studied, Dexter, drew a picture representing the relationship between the doctor and the girl (see Figure 1). Through a stimulated recall

interview that followed his drawing, he revealed the transformative effect of his process of composing on the way he thought about the story. Rather than having a fully formed picture of the characters in his head prior to drawing, Dexter said that “at the end, I understood what I was doing more than I did when I began the drawing. . . . I got more involved in the picture as I did it.” In his initial reading, Dexter simply tried to follow the action and then eventually began “thinking about something during the story . . . something difficult” that helped get him involved in his reading. These “difficult” yet unarticulated problems that he thought about suggest that they occurred at the level of sense, which he then had the opportunity to develop into an articulation through the psychological tool of drawing.

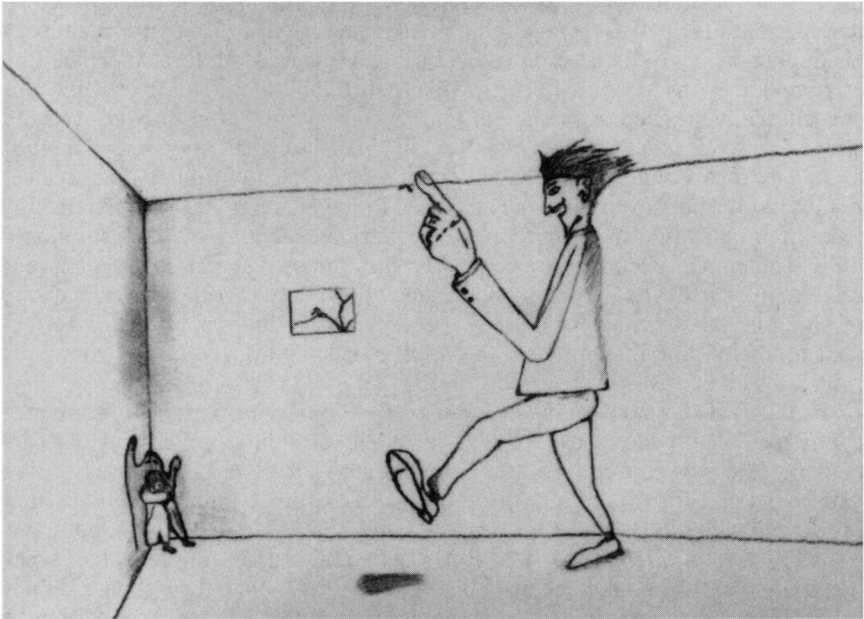


FIGURE 1. A student's artistic interpretation of William Carlos Williams's short story "The Use of Force."

When he began drawing, he was uncertain about how he would depict them, knowing only that the relationship between the girl and the doctor would involve shame and control. Dexter related that the meaning of the drawing changed as the picture developed. For instance, when he started his drawing, Dexter had not been certain what the threatening figure would represent.

Dexter: I wasn't really sure if it was him going to be the doctor or not until the end of the story, I mean, until the end of the drawing, because I was thinking, well, it could be this person that she, that she has imaged in her mind and uh—or this could be an analogy of diphtheria, but then I said it doesn't matter. It's just a doctor. It was going through her mind, [inaudible] but I liked to read. The first time I'd read the doctor; the second, the analogy. It's just through that one story.

Interviewer: So you mean, even after you drew the face and everything, it wasn't the doctor yet?

Dexter: Uh-huh. I mean it could have been a lot of things. It depends on your viewpoint of the picture, but what I was thinking is—it was the doctor and then it was an analogy of the whole attitude of the story, and then it was the, her parents' attitude, or the parents, especially her parents.

For Dexter, the story took on meaning as he developed his articulation. Moreover, he continually produced provisional images—that is, articulations of his sense of the characters' relationships and their signification to him—on his drawing, which in turn enabled him to reflect and compose further. His process of meaning making, then, involved exploratory efforts to represent his sense of the story that resulted in tentative articulation, to which he assigned different meanings as his thinking about the story progressed during his continued efforts to depict it.

I previously made the point that psychological tools are themselves subject to concentrically nested tool mediation. The various interpretations produced by the alternative school students illustrate this point well. The alternative school facility provided a local culture in which therapy for recovery was of primary importance. A successful student was one who advanced through a modified 12-step rehabilitation program while succeeding in course work and abiding by the institution's rules. The emphasis on therapy opened up the students' available tools for succeeding in course work. In addition, the school had only two classroom teachers, resulting in opportunities for cross-genre, cross-disciplinary, multimedia performance. Interpreting literature through art was thus legitimized in ways not typically allowed in mainstream schools.

The alternative school setting illustrates the ways in which the historical grounding for reading provides a sense of what constitutes an appropriate reading of a particular text in a specific context. Bloome and Egan-Robertson (1993) stressed that “the social construction of intertextuality occurs within a cultural ideology that influences which texts may be juxtaposed and how those texts might be juxtaposed, by whom, where, and when” (p. 330). In other words, cultural values sanction the juxtaposition of some texts but not others. Schools, for instance, do not typically value an artistic text as an appropriate interpretive representation to emerge from a student's engagement with literature (Applebee, 1993). The *orders of discourse* described by the New London Group (1996; Fairclough, 2000) are not automatically importable to new situations but depend on socially situated values and constraints.

Furthermore, the students themselves participated in a youth and drug culture in which rock music played an important role, a value that was appreciated by the teacher, John Coppock, who came from an artistic family that included musicians and dancers. John was also theoretically aligned with Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences (see Coppock, 1999). The mediational avenues through which students produced their interpretations of “The Use of Force,” then, were channeled by the cultural constraints and affordances provided by the alternative school and this classroom, particularly with regard to the teacher's decision to allow the students to contribute to the classroom culture.

Moreover, each student brought a vast and complex history of tool use that affected individual choices of which interpretive mode to use. Dexter, for instance,

had had a severe hearing problem as a child, causing him to communicate frequently through drawing (e.g., drawing a cereal box to say what he wanted for breakfast). While biological in origin, his hearing problem created a culture within his home that legitimized drawing as a mode of expression. Tool use, then, while mediational, is also culturally mediated.

As illustrated by Dexter's encoding of the story with personal meaning and composition of an idiosyncratic interpretive text, a part of his own history of relationships was played out in his drawing process and product. Indeed, his inscription of the threatening figure with several different associations in different iterations shows the ways in which these personal relationships contribute to the relationship he develops with the text when he engages with it in the transactional zone.

The Composing Process of Readers

Dexter's process of composition illustrates the ways in which sense is mediated into an articulation through a psychological tool, with the resulting text serving as a sign from which further sense is generated. I next develop this idea with a second set of readers from the same classroom, returning to Rosenblatt's (1978) construct of the evocation to elaborate on the process. Rosenblatt distinguishes her notion of an evocation from conceptions of reading that locate meaning primarily in the text itself, stressing instead

the lived-through process of building up the work under the guidance of the text. . . . The tendency is to speak of interpretation as the construing of the meaning of a text. This conceals the nature of the reader's activity in relation to the text: he responds to the verbal signs and construes or organizes *his responses*[,] which is for him "the work." This, we have seen, is a process in time. The reader ultimately crystallizes his sense of the work; he may seek to recall it or to relive different parts of it. . . . All of this can be designated as the evocation, and *this is what the reader interprets*. Interpretation involves primarily an effort to describe in some way the nature of the lived-through evocation of the work. (pp. 69–70)

To Rosenblatt (1978), what readers interpret—what serve as the basis for meaning—are their associations with the text, rather than the text itself (cf. Enciso, 1992). As described here, her notion of the evocation includes both zones of meaning elaborated by Vygotsky (1987): the lived-through process of association (sense) and the crystallization into a response (articulation). The evocation as a codified, intertextual experience is a critical event in the transactional zone I have described.

In this conception, what readers do is compose a text of their own in the transactional zone. This composition, this new text, is what becomes meaningful. This new text is always provisional and subject to change. To return to the example of the Confederate battle flag: The South Carolinians quoted were describing their evocations of the flag (honor and valor, oppression and slavery) rather than the flag itself. I have already illustrated this phenomenon in Dexter's evolving interpretation of the graphic image he produced in response to the events of "The Use of Force," in which the figure was "the doctor and then it was an analogy of the whole attitude of the story, and then it was the, her parents' attitude, or the parents, especially her parents."

The student texts I describe throughout this article are deliberate, formal texts that solidify their sense into a fixed representation, the articulation for the story. The completion of the image for school purposes, however, does not ossify the text's meaning. Rather, the material texts produced serve as signs from which new sense may emerge with further reflection; their materiality only implies finality. Instead, they are provisional texts that may be further revised, if not tangibly then psychologically. The infinite potential of this process is related to the notion of unlimited semiosis described by Peirce (1931–1958) in his triadic formulation of signification (cf. Witte, 1992). The same process, I argue, is available for readers who generate sense in response to reading that is articulated into a text, whether mental or material. The richness of textual meaning, therefore, results from the generative quality of a transaction in producing new associations that, once provisionally articulated as a text, produce new iterations of sense and articulation.⁵

I illustrate this process with the artistic interpretation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* produced by a small group of students in the high school English class of Cindy O'Donnell-Allen (for details of this research, see O'Donnell-Allen & Smagorinsky, 1999; Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 1998a, 1998b, 2000; for an online version of *Hamlet*, see <ftp://gatekeeper.dec.com/pub/data/shakespeare/tragedies/>). Students were assigned the task of collaboratively constructing a *body biography*, which is a life-sized human outline that the students fill with images and words that represent their understanding of a particular character. Like other groups we studied who interpreted other characters, the group that interpreted Laertes (see Figure 2) discussed and interpreted their character through a process that included the following sequence:

1. The group worked out a way of functioning socially (which was not harmonious in all groups).
2. Students constructed images of the play—that is, new texts or articulations—that they pictured mentally; they then tried to describe these images to the other students.
3. Other students then responded to these proposed images and compared them with their own images of the same character, scene, or relationship. This response usually required students to clarify both their image and their reasons for believing it was fitting, as well as discuss which images best suited the play as they understood it and wanted to depict it in their body biography text.
4. Individual group members then explained to one another the image that they thought should go into the body biography. In doing so, the group needed to discuss why they thought that particular images were apt. This discussion typically involved a rereading of the text they were interpreting (*Hamlet*) so that they could explain their images in terms of their reading of the text.
5. When they reached agreement through discussion, a student drew the image into the body biography.
6. Once inscribed on the body biography, each word and image then became part of a text that students could use as a source of further reflection, discussion, interpretation, and images.

In the following excerpt, June, Lisa, Troy, Venus, and Courtney discuss how to depict Laertes's relationship with Ophelia.

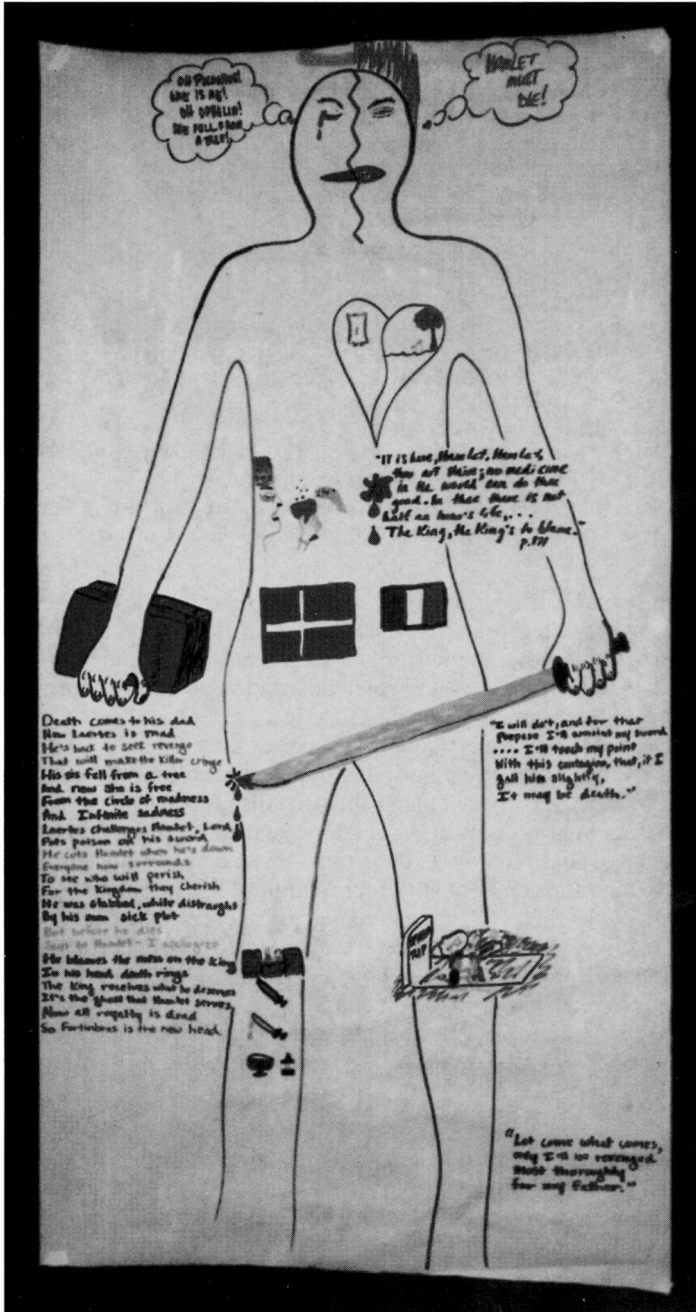


FIGURE 2. A body biography constructed by a group of students representing their interpretation of Laertes.

June: Would y'all like a tree—

Lisa: Okay, I have an idea—

Troy: You have to draw a tree with Ophelia dangling from it and there is water below. This old girl is fixin' to go in it. Look she—no, no—make her float more and say, "I'm drowning—I'm drowning and I don't care." That's what she said.

Courtney: She's under water—

June: Yeah, we have to draw her and then draw like the things like flowers and things like that.

Lisa: She does not know that she is drowning, really. Just have her saying, "I am going to stay up here."

Troy: Have her say, "That's bad, man."

Lisa: Something about how she is at one with the river.

June: Does she say that?

Lisa: No, but she is like—that is what they portray her to be thinking.

Troy: What?

Lisa: She is like at one with the river.

June: Oh yeah. Hey, Venus, what do you think? What should we do about her?

Lisa: What, we should have more lines on this thing?

June: Okay, let's do this and have like flowers. And then she can be down here. Yeah, whatever, see I can't draw at all. She can like be in the water and she is like gulp, gulp, gulp.

This portion of the discussion reveals the ways in which these students' efforts to represent the character's emotional state caused them to generate images for the play and then discuss how to interpret those images. The exploratory quality of their discussion reveals the ways in which the discussion allowed for and built on tentative efforts to construct meaning.

They developed their understanding of Laertes through their efforts to depict him and his relationships in the body biography, a medium that not only represented their view of the character but enabled the discussion that led to their understanding. During their process of association, representation, and reflection, the students discussed possible ways to depict Laertes and his relationships, developed and shared mental images of how to represent him, agreed on and produced the artifact that depicted their collective thinking, and then used that artifact to further mediate their consideration of the character and his role in the play. The ultimate representation they produced in their body biography served as a text whose configuration of signs enabled them to reflect further on the meaning of the images that the play evoked for them. Through this further reflection, they generated yet newer cycles of sense and articulation for Laertes and his relationships in the play.

Dialogic Role of Composing

As illustrated, the process of reading is a mediating act with a dialogic function: The students' thoughts both shaped and were shaped by the articulated texts they composed. In other words, two simultaneous processes took place. On the one hand, as most reading theorists would assume, the text mediated the associations through which the students developed their interpretations. On the other hand, the process of composing their texts changed the way they thought about the story.

The next transcript illustrates how this process worked for a small group of girls who interpreted the character of Ophelia through a body biography (see Figure 3). The girls offered a series of tentative depictions that served as the basis for discussion yet

did not necessarily end up in the drawing itself. Even when entered into the body biography, an image would not necessarily be a final interpretation but would serve as the basis for continued thinking and discussion of the play. The girls engaged in the following exchange during their discussion.

Carly: Okay, good deal, her bare feet could symbolize her like—not her innocence but her, oh—

Ann: Purity? Her naive, how naive she is?

Carly: Yeah, it's the world, but her nakedness is like her—you know how she is just kind of out there, she's just sort of—

Ann: Third field, left field.

Carly: Yeah, because she is just kind of, you know, just pretty much everyone's looking at her and going, "Oh, you poor thing!"

Ann: I guess she's having a good time.

Carly: Yeah. Crazy as the dickens.

Ann: Ignorance is bliss.

Carly: True.

Ann: I say we should have left the legs there so that she would have some kind of body because those dresses were really transparent, you know. I mean we could have at least told what it is. Oh, I don't know, she looks fine.

Carly: Is it okay?

Ann: Yeah.

Carly: I can draw them back on if you want me to.

Ann: No.

Sherri: So do we all have to like say something [during their presentation to the class]?

Ann: I think so.

Carly: Okay, that's done.

Ann: That's right, we don't have school Monday—I can't figure out why everybody was saying Tuesday, yeah, we don't have to be back Monday.

Carly: Yeah. Okay, so do we want to do a spine? And if so what's the spine? I think being in love for her because—

Ann: But she had no love.

Carly: Right, that's why she died.

Ann: That's why she went crazy.

Carly: Right, right, I'm just going to—

Ann: That's what we should do for the spine.

Carly: There's the spine! Shall I put "love" or "being loved"?

Ann: Being loved. And a heart, a broken heart.

This excerpt reveals the ways in which the students' processes of representation underwent continual mediation. Students would initially generate mental representations of the play that they pictured in their heads and described verbally to their group mates. Other students would then respond to these proposed, verbally represented images through discussion and reflection and juxtapose them to the images from their own understanding of Ophelia. When they reached congruent understandings of appropriate images—either literal or symbolic—they would commit them to the body biography. The process of committing an image to the body biography required them to take their individual mental representations and articulate them in a material form that required agreement, a process that necessitated clearer explanation as they discussed how to convert their separately idealized mental representations into an agreed-upon corporeal image. Once included on the body biog-

raphy, each word and image then served as a sign that potentially mediated new thinking about the play. The students thus composed a shared meaning for the play as they produced a collaborative representation of Ophelia and used each articulation as the basis for further development of their thinking about the play.

This example illustrates a process that is a key aspect of composing a meaningful text. Enciso (1992) reports that, in her research with young readers' evocations of stories, "the readers who were most involved in the stories they read were also more able to describe and discuss the events and implications of the story in greater depth and detail" (p. 99). The experience of the students I have described suggests that a reciprocal process can also take place: A reader's exploration of events and implications of a story may cause greater involvement in the reading transaction.

Culturally Constrained Subjectivity in Reading

The construct of the evocation suggests that intertextuality, typically described as the juxtaposition of texts, more precisely concerns the ways in which readers juxtapose and connect their associations with those texts. Whether inchoate (sense) or represented (articulation), these associations in turn potentially generate new evocations and texts. Because meaning emerges from these newly generated associations and texts and because evocations differ from reader to reader, depending on the kinds of relationships they have had in life and the kinds of conventions they invoke while reading, the meaning that emerges for readers is inherently idiosyncratic. As I have argued previously, readings have a codified and cultural basis in what I have called the transactional zone. If subjectivity is construed as having a codified and cultural basis, then unbridled subjectivity is possible in this zone.

I next describe a highly idiosyncratic reading of "The Use of Force" that illustrates the way in which an interpretation that departs from the story line takes place within the transactional zone. Jane and Martha, who choreographed an interpretation of the story, described how their image of the doctor's emotional state caused them to design a different ending in their dance from the one provided literally in Williams's text. According to Jane:

We did another dance at the very end and we were practicing on it and like she's sheltered like the little girl is hidden. She won't let anybody find out what her secret is and that's what she is doing. She is hiding and the doctor is trying to follow in her footsteps to try to figure out what is going on. And at the very end when it says that she did have [diphtheria], in the dance we made her die. She just fell and the doctor picked her up and carried her. Because like we were going to have the doctor die with her because it was like the third patient he had died and he was dying inside, but [our teacher] didn't really like that. And after we started thinking you know how he gets underneath the skin real hard, it is like we started thinking about it too and he doesn't really die. He tries to help her and stuff. We went further than the story went.

Jane and Martha's reconsideration of their representation following their teacher's intervention resulted in a final effort to choreograph the story's climax:

That is when they finally figured it out. It is like at the very end they walked together. It's like they walk two steps and when you do a little pause, the doctor shelters her and just looks at her because he's died with her. His whole life has just gone down the drain because it's another kid, he feels it's all his fault this time. And that is how I really felt when I was doing the dance.

This representation of the story's ending departs radically from the literal action of the story, where the girl attacks the doctor in a rage. Jane and Martha's decision to represent the feelings of the doctor in their dance, however, focused their interpretation on his experience of loss. Rather than strictly depicting the story line, they constructed a new text that represented their emotional resonance with the doctor, who emerged as a threatening figure in the image constructed by Dexter. These texts represent different reconstructions of the story, each highly subjective yet responsive to the codes of the original text. As such, they have been constructed, I would argue, in the transactional zone.

Intertextuality and Emplotment in the Cultural Construction of Meaning

I have already referred to the role of intertextuality—the juxtaposition and connection of evocations—in the construction of meaning. I next elaborate the ways in which the texts that readers compose as a consequence of their evocations are related to prior texts of their knowledge. I illustrate two types of intertextual connections I have found that readers make in their engagement with literature in classroom settings. The first comes from a text evoked from personal experience; the second comes from artistic texts recalled by students that informed their composition of a newly constructed text.

Text Evoked From Personal Experience

I illustrate this process with stimulated recall interview data from Martha, one of the girls who choreographed a dance to interpret “The Use of Force.” Martha, who danced the role of the girl, said that she identified strongly with the experience of the character because she shared her reluctance to open up to other people. Like the girl in the story, she felt “scared”: “I felt like the little girl because we live in two different worlds. . . . I felt like the little girl because she was always trying to hide from the doctor and I was like hiding myself from the doctor” in the dance. Martha's feeling that she needed to hide from the doctor was based on her own fears of being examined and pried into. Her emotional response to the story illustrates the ways in which her reading was emplotted in the broader narrative of her life's experiences. At one point, she was asked “When you dance a role, is there any real part of you that gets played out in the dancer”?

Martha: It's tough for me. When I was hiding from [Jane in the dance] she was the doctor and I was the daughter, the little girl, and it was just like me. I hate people trying to find out who I am so I was basically hiding the way I always hide but I was hiding to be somebody else. I felt like I was hiding in the little girl, but it was me that was hiding, because I do that all the time. I hide from everybody.

Interviewer: Did you feel for the character then?

Martha: Oh yeah, I felt for the character. When I was dancing I was thinking about what I would do. I hated what the doctor did to her. I wanted to kill him.

Later in the interview, Martha returned to her feelings about her character.

Martha: My feelings for the kid started when I was reading the story because there have been many times when I have had some problems. I'm like, I'm okay, get away. In a way I kind of knew how this girl was

feeling whenever the doctor was trying to get into her mouth. I am like that with dentists. I hate dentists. I won't let them get into my mouth. I'm afraid they're going to pull out my teeth. It scares me. I try to keep my mouth shut too. I put myself in her position through the whole story knowing she was scared and very insecure because she knows she is going to die. She knows through the whole story she's going to die. She doesn't want her parents to know about it.

Interviewer: Is it just dentists? Earlier you were talking about how you don't like people in general getting inside you. So was it just a dentist or was it—

Martha: Well, for people to know me, I don't like for anyone to know me, it is really scary for people to know me. Who I am or anything like doctors, and stuff like that. I don't like them to look inside my mouth. With her I feel like she doesn't want the doctor to know she is dying because I am pretty sure because she could feel her tonsils. She knows she is dying. She knew it, she knew it was there and she knew she was going to die and she didn't want her mom to know. She didn't want her parents to know.

Martha's description of her portrayal of the character reveals the emotional quality of her response to the story, an aspect of Vygotsky's work that I think is unfortunately overlooked. Yaroshevsky (1989), discussing Vygotsky's doctoral dissertation on *Hamlet*, states that Vygotsky

was inspired by the idea of an inner link between spiritual assimilation of the world and its practical transformation. Revealing the mechanism of art's impact on the real behavior of a concrete individual, without restricting oneself to determining its sociological roots and aesthetic specificity—that was Vygotsky's purpose. He endeavoured to prove that art is a means of transforming the individual, an instrument which calls to life the individual's "vast potential, so far suppressed and constrained." The view of art as ornamentation of life "fundamentally contradicts the laws of art discovered by psychological research. It shows that art is the highest concentration of all the biological and social processes in which the individual is involved in society, that it is a mode of finding a balance between man and the world in the most critical and responsible moments of life." (Yaroshevsky, 1989, pp. 148–149; Vygotsky quoted in *Psikhologiy a iskusstva* [*The Psychology of Art*], pp. 320, 330–331)

This perspective resonates with Rosenblatt's (1978) view that evocations are the source of meaning, with my view that readers compose new texts through their engagement with texts, and with Bruner's (1986) idea that literature subjunctivizes. If literature, as Bruner claims, is our only hope against the long gray night, then I would define literature rather broadly to include any text that allows for the composition of new texts. Yaroshevsky argues that Vygotsky assumed that the principal focus of psychology should be personality, "a character of the drama of life on the social state" (p. 219). This drama of life contributes vitally to the development of personality through the composition of meaning from engagement with the texts afforded by culturally channeled experiences. I would conclude, then, that from a pedagogical standpoint it is critical for teachers to make strong efforts to understand how students emplot their literary readings in their life narratives as dramatic occasions in their development of personality. Doing so would require a move

toward not just allowing but encouraging the kinds of idiosyncratic and imaginative representations provided by the students in John Coppock's class, a move that would need to take textual conventions into account but would also require teachers to appreciate the kinds of relationships and experiences that students bring to their reading and the constructive ways in which their life narratives can help to produce new texts in transaction with literary texts.

Intertextual Associations With Formal Texts

In addition to evocations from experiential texts, the students I observed drew on formally produced texts during their transactions with literature. Another group interpreting "The Use of Force," for instance, produced a dramatic interpretation of the story. They drew on images from films they had seen, including *The Exorcist*, as part of their composition of their dramatic interpretation of the story. In the following excerpt, they discuss the images they drew on and produced.

Wes: I tried to play the doctor. The story reminded me of *The Exorcist*, with the girl and the devil. . . . The way she was resisting him and not opening her mouth and stuff. . . .

Bart: They were trying to help her.

Wes: Yeah, and they were trying to help her, and she was like spit coming out her mouth, that made me think even more about [*The Exorcist*].

As described previously, intertextuality exists on two levels. First, the students juxtaposed the texts of *The Exorcist* and "The Use of Force" because of the parallels between the young girls and their fierce behavior. Second, the students juxtaposed the texts they composed from each: the evil image they generated from the girl in *The Exorcist* and the rage and resistance they perceived in the girl from "The Use of Force." Dyson (1999), among others, has argued that the role of popular culture in students' lives should receive greater recognition in schools. The students in this group illustrate the ways in which a film from popular culture provided them with both the images and the emotional content of the character of the girl as they represented her in their dramatic interpretation.

Depth and Dynamics of Context in Engagement

Previously, I argued that reading can be a mediating process; that is, it contributes to the construction of meaning. Here I describe how reading is a mediated process, one channeled by reliance on cultural practice. Much of my argument has been predicated on the idea that one's evocations are grounded in cultural practice. While personal and idiosyncratic, they rely on the codification embedded in texts, both those read and those generated (intertextuality), and the conventions embedded in recurring social practices (intercontextuality) (Floriani, 1993). These signs and tools are grounded in culture writ large, such as the Enlightenment and Romantic traditions of Western thought described by Taylor (1985) and Wertsch (2000). Culture is also writ small, often highly localized in settings such as the idiocultures described previously (cf. Cole, 1996; Fine, 1987; Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 2000). An illustration of an idioculture would be the alternative school for recovering substance abusers that provided the setting for the interpretations of "The Use of Force." The reading of the students I have described was thus mediated by the cultural practices of the school, in that emotional readings were sanc-

tioned as valuable, and mediating in that their process of producing new texts contributed to the meaning that emerged during their transaction.

Other groups I have studied have demonstrated considerably less acceptance of the potential for literary reading to contribute to the development of personality, to lead them out of the long gray night. The students from Cindy O'Donnell-Allen's mainstream high school class, for instance, exhibited varying degrees of engagement with both school and literature. During my yearlong observation of her class, I was tremendously impressed with the effort she made to construct a classroom environment that valued meaning construction, student empowerment, and open-ended thinking. This effort resulted in many remarkable progressions for a number of students. There were nonetheless students who resisted the idea that school should be a site for personal development. I attribute this opposition to culture writ semilarge. The school as a whole had a college preparatory emphasis in which meaning was generally located in texts and explained through lectures, thus making her meaning-centered approach alien to many students. Furthermore, the school lacked the emotional intensity that was central to the therapeutic mission of the alternative school, thus making introspection less urgent in the lives of the students. Finally, because the school was large and diverse, there were simply many students whose priorities did not include advanced literacy or engagement with literature as a means to personality development. These students typically ended up in the school's general track, which categorized the class that I observed.

Our analysis of groups that included disengaged students (see, e.g., Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 1998b, 2000) led us to reconsider the depth and dynamics of context in engagement. In spite of our hopes that Cindy's classroom environment would lead to transformations in students' priorities, the continued disengagement of some students led us to consider the degree to which certain students bring personal histories that create barriers to engagement with schoolwork. Among the students who interpreted *Hamlet* through body biographies was a group that interpreted the character of Claudius (see Figure 4). This group included two students who were hostile to Cindy throughout the semester and, in general, hostile toward school and other students. When in groups, they tended to undermine other students' efforts to work harmoniously on the task. The next excerpt is typical of how a boy named Jerry worked against the group and class goals, demonstrating an apathy that showed up in his group's body biography. The group was discussing how they might draw a crown on Claudius's head as part of their depiction of his character.

Jay: The crown can be something that he stands for.

Cale: Somebody draw the crown.

Jay: For incest.

Cale: Draw the crown, what?

Jay: Well—

Jerry: What are we supposed to do now? Don't be disappointed if this doesn't look so good.

Cale: I don't understand. [inaudible] Jerry! Jerry, why did you do that?

Jerry: Because it doesn't matter what it looks like as long as we get our representation. He told me to draw the crown, and I said, "OK, but don't get mad at me if I draw it badly." And everybody goes—[makes a grumbling noise.]

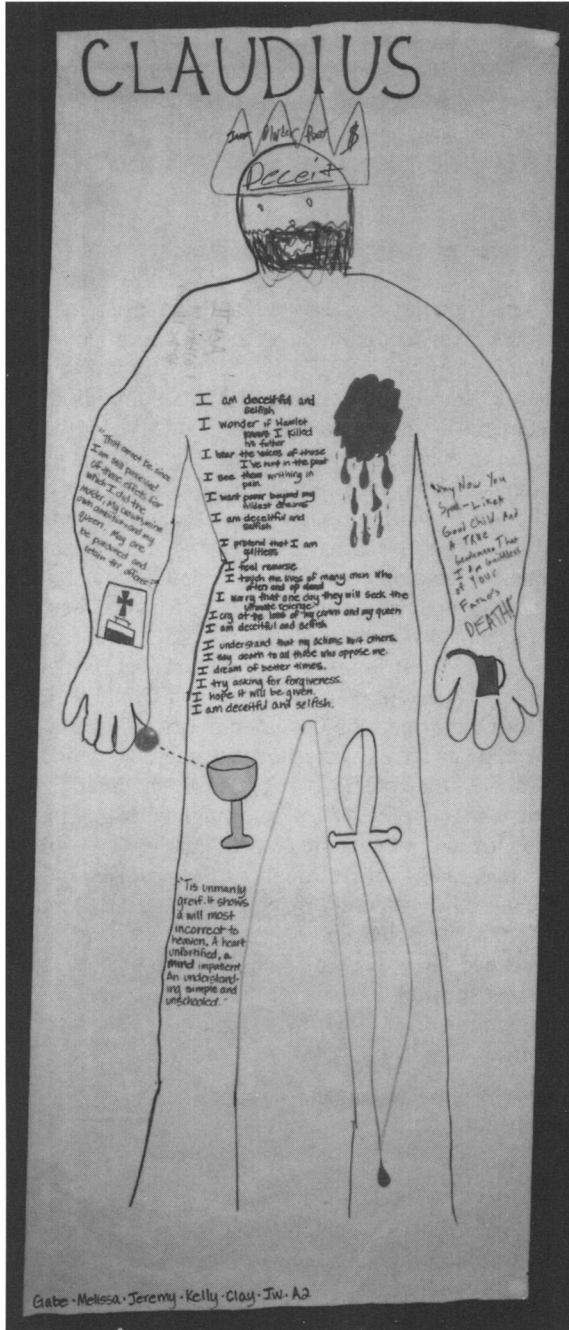


FIGURE 4. A body biography constructed by a group of students representing their interpretation of Claudius.

Cale: That looks like trash, Jerry. Jerry, that is one rotten crown, dude.

Jerry: Do you like it? Incest!

Cale: Actually, incest could be adultery.

Jerry: Oh, who cares.

Jerry's remarks reveal his eagerness to impress on others his apathy and to inscribe it in the group's body biography. In doing so, he undermined the kinds of relationships that can lead to the consonant sorts of discussions we found in other groups. In this case, Jerry interpreted Cindy's assignment as a license to produce a sloppy interpretation. Cindy had told the students that they would be graded on the ideas they were representing, rather than on the quality of their artwork. Her thinking was that she did not want to reward good artists and punish the artistically challenged, since the goal of the activity was to interpret the character rather than to demonstrate artistic prowess. Jerry's view that "it doesn't matter what it looks like" was typical of his indifferent attitude toward school and toward the other students in his group. The other students did not appreciate the trashy appearance of his drawing or his general conduct during the group activity. And we had to agree that he drew one rotten crown.

We observed a similar kind of disengagement in one other group. Our reflection on their dynamics led us to recognize the role of the relational framework in any social setting (Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 2000). We concluded that a consideration of context must go beyond what happens in individual classrooms and take into account the social worlds of the students and their prior experiences and relationships within the school culture. The establishment of a predominant motive for a classroom does not preclude other motives from surfacing or developing. Within the idioculture of a classroom, then, alternative idiocultures may develop that subvert or complicate the overall dynamics of the interactions and affect the degree to which students see the potential for constructing meaning.

Our study suggests the need to reconceive the notion of engaged reading. The classroom can suggest a motive that channels activity but does not necessarily facilitate it in any one direction. What is needed is a consideration of engagement in a much more social sense, including readers and texts but extending to relationships beyond them. Lensmire (1994) argued that notions of engagement require "the participation of *all* children in the community's important activities" (p. 147) so that each has a voice, contributes to the classroom, and is heard by others. Students' engagement with texts thus requires engagement with each other, thereby establishing an environment of mutual care and concern.

I would extend this view further to account for students' prior experiences with school and other contexts for literacy development, taking into account learners' cultural and social histories and viewing their relationship with texts in terms of this vast web of experiences that they bring to particular classroom episodes. Engagement, like other aspects of activity, is "nested" (Cazden, 1988, p. 198) in multiple social contexts that must be acknowledged and accounted for. Gallas (2001), as a practicing teacher, wonders why texts mediate for some students but not others and is vexed by the problem of how she can make texts more approachable to students who resist them. A major obstacle for elementary students, she argues, is the cultural dissonance that some students experience between reading as a conventional school activity and reading as they practice it outside school.

In terms of both Gallas's concern for reading as a cultured practice and my concern for large-scale engagement with school and its discourses as central to a student's identity (Gee, 1990), teachers face tremendous challenges in creating contexts and social practices that can make their classrooms receptive to all of their diverse students and the life narratives they bring to their appointed times together in school. On the basis of my studies of students' responses to literature, I would conclude that their potential for engagement comes from their volition to read in whatever ways are endorsed in the school and classroom, their congruence with the goals of the school and classroom, their congruence with the codes and conventions that govern both reading and social practices, and their congruence with the cultural values and practices that constitute classroom life.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that reading is a constructive act in which meaning emerges through the composition of a new text in the transactional zone. Meaning is constructed through two related processes. Initially, meaning emerges through the process of articulation as sense achieves expression through the medium of a psychological tool. This process produces some sort of image, a newly constructed text, that provisionally serves as the repository of meaning. This text is protean, changing with new reflection on its form. Its articulated potential thus makes it available as a tool for new transformations. I would argue that when a sign becomes a tool—when an exploratory, tool-mediated process leads to a representation that in turn leads to reflection and new evocations that, when articulated, generate further evocations, with the process potentially extending indefinitely—a new concept emerges. This process of concept development is at the heart of the construction of meaning. The richest meaning, then, comes through transactions that are most generative in the production of potent new texts.

The tool mediation I have described has a cultural basis. As a result, while idiosyncratic, the evocations are also culturally grounded. The influences of culture may come at the very general level, such as when a high-stakes standardized test drives a curriculum toward uniform and authoritative rather than idiosyncratic readings of texts. Culture may also mediate at more local levels, such as when advanced placement literature courses teach to the text-centered assumptions about reading embedded in advanced placement assessments (Olson, Metzger, & Ashton-Jones, 1989). Resisting culture to construct more personal meaning is, I would argue, a futile quest. As the notion of prolepsis suggests, cultural mediation is often invisible, and so the effort to escape culture is simply the effort to flee its most visible influences. From an educational standpoint, this view of reading suggests the importance of creating contexts and attendant social practices—what Moll (1990) describes as zones of proximal development—with the potential to enable students to have rich transactions with texts, keeping in mind that even the most conducive context can be resisted by students whose goals do not include having rich transactions with texts or becoming engaged with school. Within these contexts, in contrast to current trends toward standard curricula and assessment, schools can provide more opportunities for imaginative responses to reading to enable the richest transactions possible for the broadest range of students.

Issues of culture inevitably involve issues of power, in that cultures are driven by predominant practices and discourses. The culture in which reading takes place, then, suggests better and worse ways in which a reading might unfold and advantageous and less advantageous ways in which readers might position themselves through the capital provided by their readings. Imaginative transactions with literary texts might be discouraged in school systems situated in a culture of authoritative relationships and standardized testing; collaborative approaches to learning practiced by some cultural groups would be disallowed in schools predicated on notions of individual competition (Moll, 2000); and conventions followed by authors outside the traditional school canons might mark their work as inferior and thus inappropriate for school study (Lee, 1993). Indeed, readings of Vygotsky at all were suppressed by the Soviet leaders of the 1930s and 1940s who deemed his theories too bourgeois and anti-Marxist for their socialist state (Kozulin, 1986). The context of reading is thus in part constituted by the power relationships that grant different kinds of readings different degrees of capital.

The consequences that follow from unevenly distributed capital can be dramatic. Bleich (1975) and others have argued that what matters most is the meaning constructed by the reader. Perhaps this is true, although it might be hard to persuade the many goats and virgins who have been sacrificed to the thunder gods that their slayers' impressions should be paramount. Textual readings can, as this illustration shows, potentially do violence to other readers, both afield and in the classroom. As educational researchers have found, many classrooms provide little space for students who "resist the normative institutional practices of the classroom, or whose local and cultural knowledge are often displaced" by the middle-class norms and practices followed in schools (Gutiérrez & Stone, 2000, p. 156). An acultural and exclusively personal view of reading, then, can overlook the power differentials and social inequities that can ensue when some readings have greater cachet than others in a particular setting.

My studies have focused on the material texts that high school students have produced as codified designations of their evocations of texts. From my analysis of these transactions, I hypothesize that readers reading alone in the solitary confines of their dens similarly engage in text construction, if more ephemerally. Rather than producing the material texts of body biographies and plays, they produce mental representations that, while not tangible, linger yet. Though alone, they engage in culturally mediated processes, in dialogue with the great history of texts, contexts, intertexts, and intercontexts. Though alone, they act in relationship with other readers and readings, participating in communities of practice where social positioning and powerful readings have consequences for others. Through their role in this process, and through their contributions to it, meaning emerges for the worlds they inhabit and the lives they lead within their worlds. If the question is "If meaning is constructed, what is it made from?" the answer lies in the transactional zone and the kinds of processes and practices that readers engage in as they emplot the associations they make with the text with their broader life narrative, generating new texts that in turn make that narrative more comprehensible in terms of the cultural and ideological drama that composes their life story and locates that story in a broader social community's political life.

Notes

¹As a native Southerner and current resident of Georgia, I personally find it racist and offensive.

²This realization came about through conversations with Allan Luke.

³At least, I think this is a false premise.

⁴This realization came about through conversations with Mark Faust.

⁵This realization came about through conversations with Michael W. Smith.

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