What's the purpose?: How urban adolescents of color interpret and respond to noble and ignoble purposes constructed in media texts

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Abstract

This research examines how urban adolescents of color who are placed at risk of academic and social failure interpret and respond to noble and ignoble purposes constructed in media texts. Drawing from New Literacy Studies, which provide impetuses for educators and researchers to explore youth's literacy practices and media engagements as they occur and evolve in alternative teaching/learning contexts, this study uses participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and participant journals to determine youth's conceptions of *purposes*. These interpretive methods provide data sets that show how this particular group of youth are, or are not, responsive to noble and ignoble purposes. A Stanford Center on Adolescence 2008 *Youth Purpose Research Award* funded this research.

Keywords: African American urban adolescents, New Literacy Studies, Media Studies, Purpose, Urban education

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Urban adolescents of color have historically been marginalized and underserved in schools (Weis & Fine, 2000; McLaren, 2006). Their subjection to race and class oppression has remained stable in tandem with this marginalization, rendering their academic achievement and social success arguably inconsistent and at risk of intergenerational underdevelopment (Gadsden & Wagner, 1995; Gadsden, 1998, 1999). However, emerging studies of these youth's literacy practices present important ideas about where and how they engage in literacy work and are deemed successful and engaged. These studies dare us to imagine literate activities that thrive within and beyond the walls of the classroom and in relationship to media texts–the oral, print, digital, still and moving visual images, and periodic phenomena that couch information (Hull & Schultz, 2002; Knobel, 1999, 2001; Mahiri, 1997; Moje, 2000, 2004; Schultz, 2002). New Literacy Studies (NLS) support the cultivation of this work.

Urban Adolescents of Color, New Literacy Studies, and Purpose: A Brief Review of the Literature

NLS examines the intersections of adolescent literacy practices, teaching/learning contexts, and engagements with media and technology (Moore, Bean, Birdshaw, & Rycik, 1999; Knobel, 1999; Kress & Jewitt, 2003; Leander & Sheehy, 2004; Staples, 2008a, 2008b). These studies are distinct from traditional inquiries into adolescent thinking and action because they attend to the purpose driven, socially situated, and culturally responsive ways individual and communities of young people construct and use literacy practices (Moje, 2000; Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000; O'Brien, 2001; Lankshear & Knobel, 2002; Kress, 2003, Staples, 2010). Literacy practices are the reading, writing, speaking and listening tactics used to communicate ideas, transfer knowledge, generate questions, develop wisdom, and construct new texts (Staples, 2007, 2008).

In addition to these foci, NLS contributes important understandings about the ways adolescent literacies evolve and are used in contexts, in addition to the communities of learning that are built as a result of them (Schultz, 2002; Moore, Bean,

Birdshaw, & Rycik, 1999). These studies counter notions that literacy learning and engagements take place exclusively in schools and in relationship to traditional print documents alone by explaining the ways they emerge and function within communities and homes (Heath, 1983; Hull & Schultz, 2002), community centers and alternative academic programs (Mahiri, 1997; Moje, 2000) and art/music initiatives (Schultz, 2002; Heath & McLaughlin, 1993). These works also suggest possibilities for imagining research that presents youth, and urban adolescents of color in particular, as integral and highly valuable informants about their uses of texts and literacies in contexts other than schools or regular classrooms.

In relationship to a call for re-envisioned literacy education that is attentive to media, learning, and contexts, Swenson, Young, McGrail, Rozema, and Whitin (2006) suggest effective literacy education and research must also promote critical understanding about urban adolescents' existing use of new media and literacies for their own diverse purposes and contemplation of purposes. "Purpose" addresses the intentions young people form to give their lives meaningful direction and also contribute to the greater good. Damon, Menon and Bronk (2003) further define purpose as "a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self" (p. 121). They call for research that assists our understanding of "the processes and conditions responsible for cultivating noble purposes in the young" (2003, p. 126). This delineation is particularly important for urban adolescents of color who are consistently placed at risk of academic and social failure and thereby may be simultaneously at risk of assuming underdeveloped, skewed, or ignoble purposes. To attend closely to this abstract concept, it is important to initiate and draw from rich, analytical descriptions of the ways youth merge literacies and texts in alternative teaching/learning contexts in order to interrogate and construct purposes. Yet, research on the ways urban adolescents of color use literacy practices and texts in the service of understanding and developing purpose is ostensibly absent in NLS literature. More specifically, attention to the ways urban adolescents of color interpret and respond to the "noble" and

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"ignoble" purposes constructed in media texts has not been explored.

Research Question

How do urban adolescents of color placed at risk of academic and social failure interpret and respond to "noble" and "ignoble" purposes constructed in media texts?

Methodology

The study centered in this article took place in a northeastern urban high school in the United States called Old City [2] High School. Its student population is 98% African American and nearly 80% of students qualify for free breakfast and/or lunch. The school is situated in a historically significant, yet economically impoverished community with strong social, intergenerational ties among its members. Over the span of one academic year (nine [9] months), I (Jeanine) facilitated a literacy community to engage media texts that present characters with strong noble and ignoble purposes. The texts included: films and various popular culture periodicals. To conduct this study, I worked with ten (10) students, ages 16–18. I used participant journals, interviews and group responsive conversation recordings as responsive artifacts. I met with students to engage texts and participate in activities for two (2) hours, two-four (2–4) times per week for one academic year.

A triangulated methodological framework useful for analyzing data sets that reveal the ways urban adolescents use literacies and engage texts to interpret and respond to purpose includes sociocultural discourse analysis (Gee, 1990; Gee & Green, 1998), endarkened feminist frameworks for interpreting written works (Ladson-Billings, 1999, 2000; Dillard, 2000) and theories about adolescent literacies to understand students' choices and actions (Knobel, 1999; Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000; Moje, 2002). James Gee's pioneering work in sociocultural discourse

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[2] A pseudonym.

analysis provides systems for coding, interrogating, and interpreting data that contain voice (i.e. audio transcripts). These ways include reviewing student generated artifacts to note instances of word choice, phrasing, recurrences of voiced attention to certain phenomena and absences of verbalized attention to certain phenomena, in addition to ways of talking about purposes that were particular (i.e. unique, surprising, provocative). Correspondingly, endarkened feminist epistemologies provided a means for grappling with responsive written data that emerged in relationship to various types of texts. Interpretive adolescent literacy theories provided systems to explore the methods students used to engage media in relationship to their own questions, concerns, and stances about socially, politically and culturally charged content. These lenses cooperated to help us (Jeanine and Stephanie) consider the ways students generated talk and writing around characters' purposes in ways that were particular to their individual and collective standpoints and sociocultural situations.

Data Collection Methods and Analysis

Preliminary Survey

We designed a preliminary survey comprised of open ended and multiple choice questions to gauge potential participants' range of literacy practices, media use, and senses of purpose.

Participant-Observer Observations

I (Jeanine) acted as participant-observers in the literacy community and noted youth's patterns of selections, verbalized interpretations, and responses to noble and ignoble purposes portrayed in media texts.

Participant Journals

We designed semi-structured participant journal prompts (i.e. with some pre-determined research-based prompts to couch reader responses see: Staples, 2007 & Staples, 2008a, 2008b). These journals provided consistent views of the ways participants

grappled with noble and ignoble purposes constructed in media texts over time.

Participant Interviews and Conversations

We designed semi-structured in-process and exit interviews, in addition to small and large focus groups, to delve deeper into youth's interpretation of and responses to noble and ignoble purposes depicted in media texts.

Discussion: On *The Matrix*
(A Brief Review Of An Engaged Media Text)

The Matrix was among the more salient media texts students engaged within the study. A synopsis follows:

> In the near future, computer hacker Neo is contracted by underground freedom fighters who explain that reality as he understands it is actually a complex computer simulation called the Matrix. Created by a malevolent Artificial Intelligence, the Matrix hides the truth from humanity, allowing them to live a convincing, simulated life in 1999 while machines grow and harvest people to use as an ongoing energy source. The leader of the freedom fighters, Morpheus, believes Neo is "The One" who will lead humanity to freedom and overthrow the machines. Together with Trinity (a female Captain in the Resistance), Neo and Morpheus fight against the machines' enslavement of humanity as Neo begins to believe and accept his role as "The One" (Gittes, Pereyra, & redcommander27, *n.d.*).

As students discussed representations of purpose in this media text, they coordinated themselves to discuss whether Neo, in particular, could be described as having either a noble or ignoble purpose. Students defined noble purpose as "the reason that someone is living"; an individual's "fundamental intention" or "function" that renders "positive effects in one's personal life and in the lives of others" (Whole Group Conversation, February 10, 2009). Interestingly, students similarly defined ignoble purpose.

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They surmised that an ignoble purpose is also, "the reason that someone is living"; an individual's "fundamental intention" or "function" that renders "negative effects in one's personal life and the lives of others" (Whole Group Conversation, February 20, 2009). Per information found in the initial survey, none of the adolescent participants had discovered their purpose at the time of the study. They were, however, very intrigued by the idea of identifying the purposes of others, including *Matrix* characters.

The Matrix is essentially a dystopia, a wasteland cloaked in the illusion of a type of banal functionality. Students helped themselves to grasp its nuances by juxtaposing physical traits of their high school and physical traits of the earth in the *Matrix*. For example, students noted that their school, an historic architectural gem from the outside with tangible facades of efficiency, actually suffered similar negative ruptures in organizational structure and citizens' repressed happiness. Once students understood the context of the world storied in the media text, they invoked a specific strategy to determine Neo's purpose. First, they asked a series of questions designed within the context of whole group responsive conversations:

1. What does the character *do* in the media story? (That is, what kind of actions do they commit to? Do these actions yield positive or negative consequences? What evidence do you have to support these conclusions?)

2. What does the character *say* in the media story? (That is, what kind of language does the character use to communicate his ideas, interests, goals, etc.? Does this language help or hurt people?)

3. What does the character *think* about? (That is, what occupies the characters thoughts (usually evidenced by voice-overs and flashbacks)? Are they evil thoughts or benevolent ones? Do these thoughts bear on his actions and/or language?)

Students recorded these questions (which emerged over time within responsive whole group conversations), in their journals. They applied these questions, in concert with one another, as a type of interpretive framework, to understand purpose as it was

represented in the characters of this and other media texts. Students determined that Neo embodied a noble purpose. They concluded that the meaning of his life/existence was rooted in "salvation…which is good it makes people free" and "justice….which is good because it makes people equal" (Kelly and John[3], respectively, Whole Group Conversation, September 17, 2009).

Findings

Preliminary findings suggest that the African American urban adolescent youth in this study:

1. Establish criteria for identifying noble and ignoble purposes
2. Understand noble purposes deeply (i.e. ascribe personal affiliations to them, implicate themselves or close loved ones as potential benefactors of them, conceptualize features of them that have multiple meanings)
3. Understand ignoble purposes deeply (i.e. relate personal and personally relayed lived experiences to them, correlate them with dishonorable purposes portrayed in multiple media and print texts)
4. Are hesitant to assume affiliations with purposes in either case
5. Begin to consider "reverberations" of purpose (i.e. social implications that include local and global contexts

These findings represent emergences found in analyzed data before the close of the inquiry period. They are presented because of the consistency with which they evolved across multiple data sets during the first six months of the study. All students consistently focused on using the *do, say, think* interpretive framework in order to make sense of the purpose of characters constructed in media texts. When considering the nature of purpose (and whether it was noble or ignoble) students extended

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[3] Pseudonyms.

their interpretive framework so that it could include stories of people they knew from their families, network of friends and associates, and neighborhood community members. These personal stories, juxtaposed with various media stores like *The Matrix*, helped students to feel comfortable and familiar with the conclusions they drew during periods of talk and writing. These stories helped students to form concrete narrative parallels which enabled deeper understandings of the abstract concept. Students agreed, however, that because purposes were so "important" and "permanent" or immutable, they were hesitant to assume affiliations with either noble or ignoble purposes (Sieta and Devon[4], respectively, Whole Group Conversation, December 1, 2009). This hesitation indicates that students have a sophisticated understanding of the impacts one's purpose can have and the significance it has in relation one's life trajectory and the community in which one is situated.

Contribution and Significance

The findings of this study are promising because of the insights they provide into the literacy practices that African American urban adolescent youth invoke and evolve after school. These practices shed light on students' literate lives as a whole. The study is limited by its scope and duration. However, it points to a need for additional inquiries into the literate lives of these students and considerations of the ways they draw conclusions, reason and integrate personal narratives, all of which are literate practices, in the service of an inquiry. It also points to the ways students do this work collaboratively, and in relationship to rather difficult abstract concepts.

It is imperative for teachers and researchers to understand youth's processes for development beyond the "school-sanctioned labels that carry with them baggage, or disparaging connotations" (Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000, p. 401). That is, the literature calls for the emergence of research that attends to the ways we can understand adolescents beyond the labels of "non-

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[4] Pseudonyms.

reader," "low literate," "purposeless" and "troublemaker" and instead as the "artists", "poets", "cultural critics", and "tech designers" they often become when engaged in multimodal literacy work with media in alternative contexts. Urban youth of color in particular often must navigate deficit-laden discourses pertaining to their personhood, communities, academic abilities, and critical capacities. Opportunities to articulate the self and one's personal trajectory outside of these discourses, while using a variety of media texts to do so, provide essential arenas for self-expression, creativity and fulfillment. Such opportunities are impetuses for understanding and developing purpose. As Lois Weis and Michelle Fine (2000) assert, "youth need spaces to work through the pains of oppressed identities, to explore the pleasures of not-yet identities, and to organize movements for purposes we have not yet imagined" (p. xiv).

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