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## Sharing Identity: Indexing Cultural Perspectives through Writing Responses to Graphic Novels

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## Introduction

If interactions contribute to identity formation, (Swain, et. al., 2011, p. 87) then there is a socio-cultural component to identity. While it is impossible to label identity because of its ever-evolving nature, attempts can be made to gain insight into a person's perceived actions and use those actions as data for exploring possible identity construction. For socio-cultural theory, "Identity is never determined by one person alone but is socially constructed" (Swain, et. al., p. 88). With that in mind, studying a person's language use in response to a given stimulus may reflect certain values a person holds subsequently leading to identity.

By focusing on reflection, identity can be constructed and/or highlighted by accessing both cultural and learned experiences in order to synthesize a given stimulus. In presenting two people of differing cultures with an object that is common to both, the function of the object may remain the same but the experiences of the people with that given object may reflect differing value systems. This differentiation in valuation is one place identity can reveal itself.

This study looked at ELL students' identity construction in an urban high school. Specifically, students' reflections and reactions to a graphic novel were used as data to explore how urban ELL students constructed their identities through their writing. Additionally, the data was examined through a socio-cultural lens focusing on how students' written reactions to the graphic novel reflected their cultural and social backgrounds.

## Indexing Cultural Perspectives

It is human nature to deduce certain characteristics based on perceptions. Ochs (1992) sees "indexicality" as "...a property of speech through which cultural contexts such as social identities (e.g. gender) and social activities (e. g. gossip session) are constituted by particular stances and acts" (Ochs, 1992, p. 335). The importance of indexicality lies in its power for researchers to attempt making connections between what a person says/writes/does and what those actions reveal about a person. Those connections can be based in linguistic ethnography.

Wetherell (2007) makes a case for the inclusion of discursive psychology in linguistic ethnography by deconstructing an episode of a reality television show. While much of Wetherell's argument focuses on conversation analysis as a means for incorporating discursive psychology, a theory for how to recognize identity is given: "...my preference is to explore the acting out of identity and personal order as patterned everyday methods, as psycho-discursive practices" (p. 676).

The data collected in the upcoming study was not of a candid and/or everyday nature, but it did include elements of everyday life (trashcan, food, shelter, etc.). Given this assertion that everyday-life practices are a significant gauge for recognizing identity, exposure to everyday stimuli coupled with a written response may shed light on a person's perceived identity.

Gallager, et. al. (1999) proposes that the observable self of a person is made up of two components: "...the intentional attitude of a person and contextualized action" (p. 7). In the proceeding study, the "contextualized action" will be a written response to a given text and prompt. Specifically, "The Source" (2004) by Will Eisner was used. According to the Gallger, an action such as writing in response to a given prompt will cause the focus of a participant to remain on answering the question; all attention is given to writing the response which may cause a participant to lose some awareness of his/her actions which are then analyzed for indication of a person's identity (Gallager, et. al., p. 10).

The indication that Gallager is addressing is essentially his way of indexing (Ochs, 1992) or identifying certain traits of a person based on his/her actions. Through predetermined and observable actions (writing in this case) a person reveals how they perceive themselves through both their conscious and unconscious actions.

Nero's (2005) analysis on how the multi-faceted nature of students identified as "ESL" sheds light on their identities. Specifically, the radically different experiences students bring to each and every classroom reflect varying identities that are influenced by both their first languages and the language they are learning. Other dynamics also influence identity construction: "...students labeled bilingual and assigned to ESL or bilingual classes increasingly complicate the language picture, and bring with them to class a host of sociocultural and political issues that extend far beyond linguistic ability, which are manifested through language use and language attitudes" (Nero, 2005, p. 196-197). Recognition of the influence that culture, politics, and society have on language results in a view of language as being socially constructed (Ochs, 2002).

Social commentary then becomes a gauge for studying how student reactions are reflective of their identities as studied through language. In having ESL students comment and deconstruct socially relevant issues (with Will Eisner's depiction of the multi-faceted role of a trash can in an urban environment) particular cultural perspectives may manifest themselves in the students' writings; students begin to index themselves through their responses. Specifically, students index their cultural values which can be linked to external stimuli.

Schwartz (2006) conducted a study where there was an attempt to universalize the concept of culture. In studying 73 countries, Schwartz categorized nations' perceived cultural similarities and dissimilarities. While the

study is fascinating in that there is an attempt to separate the innumerable cultures of the world into seven overarching categories, Schwartz's commentary on how culture is affected by ecology is of prime importance here. For Schwartz, "Culture joins with social structure, history, demography, and ecology in complex reciprocal relations that influence every aspect of how we live" (2006, p. 139).

### Utilizing the Comic Medium

Scholes (2011) asserts that, "the restricted notion of literature with its narrow view of the creative imagination prevents us from demonstrating in our classrooms the relevance of the texts we cherish to the actual lives of our students (p. 33-34). Throughout Scholes' work on what he terms "textuality," the idea of challenging the traditional norms of literature, and in turn literacy, is important in a world of changing media. Not only has literature changed, but the media which adolescents (and adults) utilize is changing as well.

The graphic novel, which Eisner (1985) labeled as "sequential art," is a medium which represents what The New London Group (1996) termed "multiliteracies." As a medium which blends text and visuals in order to tell a cohesive story, the medium is positioned well as a tool for working with language learners.

Chun (2009) worked with ESL students while they read the graphic novel *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1986), a universally acclaimed graphic novel about the holocaust where the Jewish people are depicted as mice and the Nazi soldiers are depicted as cats. In particular, Chun promotes the concept of utilizing *Maus* as a supplemental text when teaching and discussing historical events of that time (World War II) and, "can engage students' attention and activate their imagination throughout the author's use of multimodalities in presenting visually arresting narratives..." (p. 147). Chun goes on to praise the visuals of *Maus* as being important for students who are still learning a new language to understand the story through their multiliteracies.

Bitz (2004) has also utilized graphic novels in a classroom, but the usage in that study focused on students creating their own comic books "while motivating children not only to attend the sessions but also to take ownership of and pride in their work" (p. 575). The study was done as an after-school program with inner city students, and according to Bitz, "The Comic Book Project seemed to have the most marked effect on children with limited English proficiency. These children used the project to tell their own stories, many of them revolving around their first introductions to the United States" (p. 585). The value of the comic medium to students whose primary language is not English is important to note here. Bitz attributes the creation process as being beneficial to the students,

but it's also important to note the structure of comic literature and how that structure contributes to promoting unique interpretations among readers.

One of the premiere values of graphic novels as teaching tools is in “the gutter,” or the space between panels on a comic page. McCloud (1993) asserts that, “the gutter plays host to much of the **magic** and **mystery** that are at the very **heart of comics!** Here in the **limbo** of the gutter, **human imagination** takes two separate images and **transforms** them into a single idea” (p. 66, bolds by original author). This is place where students’ inferencing and analysis skills are accessed with a particular emphasis on making connections between events and characters.

McCloud also highlights graphic literature’s ability to be a medium which is “a form of amplification through simplification” (p. 30). The universality of this concept has profound implications for utilizing graphic novels in a classroom, especially a classroom with so diverse a population as ELL. Photographs and film are also able to elicit reactions and induce conversation, but the inherent diversity of artistic interpretation from artist to artist is a benefit which only graphic novels possess.

Additionally, just as different artists’ interpretations can change meaning, readers’ interpretations of the text and art varies. Being able to interact with graphic literature requires multimodal literacy which has readers “combining information from multiple sources in order to comprehend (in the case of reading) or to construct (in the case of writing) a text” (Brozo, Moorman, & Meyer, 2014, p. 40). The value of utilizing a graphic novel with English Language Learners is the importance of the art within the multimodal text.

“The Source” (Eisner, 2004) is a silent comic (no text), so the participants primarily use their visual literacy skills (Kress, 2003) to interact with the text and interpret meaning. Additionally, as the participants are language learners, the transition from the imagery they are interacting with to the text (responses) they are producing displays the understanding the students have of the text and highlights the capital they bring to class and the study.

In the proceeding study, students respond to a prompt about a common object in nearly every American environment: a trashcan. Schwartz’s (2006) inclusion of ecology as being a significant factor in studying culture (and subsequently cultural perspectives) needs to be taken into account when looking at the students’ writings.

## The Study

What could an ESL student's writing in response to a short segment of a graphic novel about a trashcan tell us, though? In part, the analysis depends on the context in which the students find themselves. The students in the proceeding study are minorities from an urban high school in southern Pennsylvania enrolled

in the school's ELL program. Hart, et. al. (1998) looked at how stereotypes of urban minorities affect perceived identities with an emphasis on how urban, adolescent minorities displayed what they perceived to be a "moral identity" (p. 514). Specifically, "Urban, minority adolescents value moral goals and frequently develop commitments to lines of action that reflect these goals" (p. 517). The "lines of action" could include responding to a given prompt. Of key importance here is Hart and Ford's assertion that the identity of adolescent, urban minorities can be ascertained through actions and subsequent indexing.

McNamara (1997) takes competing theories of social identity and conducts an extensive literature review in an effort to summarize the concept. As McNamara puts it, "...individuals are seen to attempt to maximize a sense of their positive psychological distinctiveness by establishing terms for the comparison that will favour in-group membership" (p. 563). People respond in similar ways to emphasize the distinctiveness of a given social group, or as McNamara says, the people are "establishing terms" on which to create a unified identity. While belonging to a group is an important aspect of identity, each person's individualized perception of a group can be different whilst sharing general characteristics. For example, while all the members of a given sports team will consider themselves a literal participant in the team's activities, each member's understanding of the concept "team" may be slightly different.

This all leads to the study at hand: studying socio-cultural identity among ELL students in an urban high school utilizing indexicality. If one is to deduce certain characteristics of a given student through his/her writing(s), then indexing a student's responses through social issues may be a way of recognizing said characteristics. The research questions were as follows:

- How do participants in this study, labeled by their school as ELL's, interpret and respond to a story that is entirely graphical?
- Do those responses index their personal identity(s)?
- How do the participants form these identity(s) through their written responses to a graphic novel?

## **Methodology**

This study was conducted at an urban high school in Pennsylvania with what the teacher of the class described as a "low level" ELL class. While the class usually had nine students, four students were able to participate with three students being absent from class and two others not possessing the proper consent forms. Of these four students (two males, two females) three spoke Spanish as their primary language and one spoke French as a primary language. The teacher, Mrs. D., was fluent in both Spanish and English and provided translation when needed.

The study had students read a short portion of Will Eisner's *New York: Life in the Big City* entitled "The Source" (2004, p. 47-49). This short piece of Eisner's graphic novel contained no text making it a completely visual narrative. The class was asked to read the short portion of Eisner's graphic novel for a few minutes. It is also important to note here that Mrs. D. translated all instructions in Spanish and helped the student who primarily spoke French with instructions. After reading the text, the students were given a writing prompt with the question, "How would you describe the trash can's role in the city based on the comic you just read?" While the participants were not given a time limit and/or any specific directions as to how they should respond, most of the students completed the assignment in about twenty minutes. During the activity, students were permitted to use English/Spanish dictionaries and/or electronic word translators. Additionally, Mrs. D. assisted students with some words they were not familiar with.

Eisner's graphic novel was chosen because it was a silent comic (no text) and also addressed social issues that arise in urban environments. As McCloud (1993) notes about the images in graphic novels, "PICTURES ARE **RECEIVED** INFORMATION. WE NEED NO FORMAL EDUCATION TO 'GET THE MESSAGE.' THE MESSAGE IS INSTANTANEOUS"(p. 49, Capitalization and emphasis by author). McCloud's analysis of images aids in analyzing the students' indexing of their identities through their writing responses as the multimodal text accesses their "multiliteracies" (New London Group, 1996) as opposed to just traditional literacy (Westby, 2010).

### **The Participants**

The participants in this study, as was stated before, were in an "ELL" course at their high school. Additionally, all four students cited English as not being their primary language. Additionally, their names in this study are pseudonyms to protect their identities. What follows are their names along with their primary language:

1. Alesandra - Primary language was Spanish
2. Natalie - Primary language was French
3. Josh - Primary language was Spanish
4. Julio - Primary language was Spanish

### **Data Analysis**

The context of Eisner's short story reflects an encounter all people would have during the course of a given day: encountering a trashcan. An encounter with a trashcan is relatively uneventful, but Eisner deconstructs the existence of a

singular trash can in order to emphasize the value of such a common object. However, Eisner's deconstruction is not of premiere value here. Instead, the four students and their reactions to this text provided an index for recognizing cultural perspectives.

Recognition of the trashcan in the story was both tacit and stated in the students' writings. Alesandra created a comparison to help readers identify the literal object: "This trash can is the same one as other that you see in your city. But this one is little more important for the people you see on the comic." There was an assumption in Alesandra's writing that people lived in cities and/or that the value of this trash was primarily recognized by people who lived in cities. There was a dichotomy here that separated and indexed the value of a given object based on physical surroundings. For example, someone who lived in a rural area might look at a car as more valuable than someone who lived in a city where public transportation was more accessible.

In recognizing a value system in a physical object, Alesandra recognized her physical surroundings as being vital to her understanding and subsequent valuing of a given object. In this case, the student placed a unique value on the trash can by assuming that the reader of her response was familiar with such a valuation: "... same one as other that you see in your city" (Alesandra). This goes back to McNamara's (1997) assertion that people naturally group themselves in ways that emphasize similarities. For Alesandra, the assumption that the reader lived in a city and that a trash can in that presumed city was similar to the one she interacted with relied on a socio-cultural perception of the object. Looking back at McNamara's idea of privileging "in-group membership" (p. 563) as a means of identity formation, Alesandra appeared to be constructing her identity by appealing to what she perceived to be a common cultural perspective. Her comments about people sharing similar types of trashcans resounded in its implications for identity construction.

Josh saw the trashcan in a much more literal and universal way: "The trash cab is something that they use every single day. To help them survive." The valuing of the object was omnipresent here as the student recognized the trashcan in the story as a survival tool (Figure 1).

The rest of Josh's reaction to the short story was mainly reciting what happened in the story except for his last sentence: "That the same sycle the trash it was full then the day pass againg is full and Keep the sycle." This appeared to be accessing of prior knowledge and recognizing a cycle in a given environment. However, the student's perspectives here were a bit nebulous. For one, there was no clear definition of where he stood in this cycle or if he did at all. The one thing that was for sure was the student's recognition of the trash can as a valuable commodity.



(Figure 1: Trashcan as a Source)

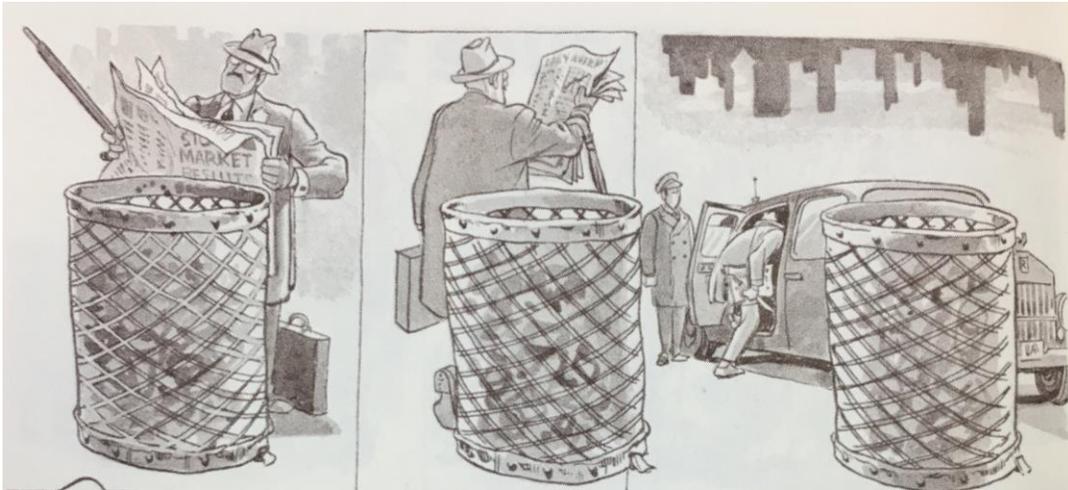
In accordance with Josh's idea of a cycle, Julio contributed to the concept of the trash can as an ever evolving and contributing source: "The things of this story is that everything that we throw in the trash ca other people can use and survide in this world." Julio's stance was that of contributor as opposed to receiver. As such, he positioned himself as a contributing member of a community.

Julio's inclusive pronoun "we" also included everyone understanding the value of the trashcan, or at least possessing an understanding that was similar to his. It constituted a way of involving everyone and subliminally valuing differing value systems as they related to the trashcan. It was a safe position assuming no one had to receive from the trashcan and only contributed to it. The extent of this student's positioning ended here as more data would be needed to more thoroughly determine Julio's own indexing of his socio-economic status in relation to his commentary on this story. Ultimately, his perspective on the role of a trash can in a city was that of contributor and not beneficiary.

### *Wealthy Man*

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the comic that was addressed by the participants was the character of the wealthy man who picks a newspaper out of the garbage with his umbrella. While it is possible to assert that this man may not necessarily be wealthy, Will Eisner makes the point of placing an expensive car with a chauffeur holding the door open to limit any such consideration (Figure 2). The presence of the wealthy man is interesting within the context of the story because the dynamics of need are addressed especially as it relates to disenfranchised and impoverished peoples. As a character designed to elicit

reaction, this revealed much about the students and their subliminal revelations about their own perspectives as they related to life in a city.



(Figure 2: The Wealthy Man)

The variety of ways the students characterized the rich man in the story was quite telling, but they all shared a common characteristic: disdain. For one, Josh described the wealthy man as "Some people look for New paper in the trash cab because they are lazy to buy a new paper..." The operative word there is "lazy." Interestingly, the rich man could be interpreted as being lazy. However, it would seem easier for a rich man to simply go to a store and buy a newspaper as opposed to physically and purposefully search through a trash can for a dirty newspaper. With this in mind, Josh equated "lazy" with being miserly.

Wealth equated to effort in these students' perspectives. Josh appeared to be displaying a healthy respect for earning what was desired in life whereas the rich man in the story is taking a short cut in order to obtain what he wants. As such, his obvious wealth creates a morally objectionable course of action that Josh found worthy of admonishment, or at least being addressed. It is important to note that Josh, as well as the other students, never criticized the other characters sifting through the trash can as being socially incorrect. According to the students, there was a dichotomous relationship with trash cans as they related to people of affluence and those who struggled.

Alesandra reaffirmed the questionable behavior of the rich man in the story: "Another person came and find a newspaper. But this person is rich. I can't believe a rich man look at a trash can." Alesandra's reaction to the behavior of the rich man appeared to be rooted in neediness. The language Alesandra used also revealed a lot about her perspective of the man's behavior. The verb "look"

seemed to imply a more thorough disbelief of the event as looking would naturally precede any other action.

More than simple disdain, Alesandra's reaction to the wealthy man also implied a social structure that she was aware of. Depending on one's socio-economic position in society, the right to the contents of the garbage can were limited. This was apparent in earlier comments by Alesandra regarding a homeless woman looking for clothes: "This person is not looking for food this person is looking for clothes." Here there was no objection or questioning of the character's motives or subsequent actions. The other students corroborated this notion. Natalie stated, "So the trash can play the role of helper. People take food even chip people." The word "chip" in her response would seem to be similar phonetically to the word "cheap." Nevertheless, Natalie was differentiating between those with means and those without. Even going back to Josh's comment regarding the wealthy man as being "lazy," this reflected a cultural perspective that recognized the wealthy man's actions as being inappropriate because the character had the ability to purchase a newspaper outright.

Finding value in the trashcan as a vital component of a city's existence and questioning the morality of the wealthy man fishing for a newspaper out of a trash can indexed (Ochs, 1992) an awareness of morality (Hart and Ford, 1998). As was stated earlier, more research would need to be conducted to establish the students' actual socio-economic statuses. However, if McNamara's (1997) assertion that people relate to similar characteristics in order to become a member of a given group is taken into account, the students' support of the homeless characters and their disdain for the wealthy man in this section of the graphic novel reflects the students' efforts to position themselves as possessing strong ethical standards.

## Conclusion

Being active participants in a society, the participants in this study found similar cultural values in the events that unfolded in the graphic novel. Not only did the students share similar values, they associated themselves with a larger and more clearly defined cultural group. Doing this provided a glimpse at the students' identity constructions. In associating themselves with unique perspectives on trash cans and the dynamics of need among urbanites, they indexed their value systems. Unfortunately, the data here was limited both in participants and scope.

Future research in this area could take into account the socio-economic status of the participants and look for relations in identity construction and wealth. Even without the added dynamic of socio-economic statuses, the data from this study provided insight into how urban ELL students index themselves through

their reaction to given stimuli and subsequent yet tacit implications of value systems.

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