Constructing Third Space Multiliteracies in the Shadow of the Blast Furnace

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The secondary English student teachers I coach and mentor each spring semester in the public schools of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, often find themselves in what they have described as a third space—never fully accepted as the classroom teacher, but no longer exactly college students either. It’s often an uncomfortable place to be, but one in which they discover a great deal about themselves as teachers and learners. In one seminar I facilitated, a pre-service English teacher told the story of her first day in what the local school district called its ARC program, or academic reinforcement curriculum, for ninth and tenth grade students who had not been deemed proficient on the state’s high stakes tests.

A young woman in her class approached the lone extra student desk that had been moved to the rear of the room to serve as the student teacher’s workspace. “Miss,” she said in a whisper, “please don’t feel bad if you can’t help us either—we know we’re the dumb kids. We’re all from the Southside, and we’re all flunking. Just look at your schedule. It tells you. We’re labeled ARC on the schedule. Didn’t they tell you what that means? We’re All Retarded Children.” While the novice teacher tried to take on the voice of her more experienced mentor and share her confidence in her new student, she couldn’t help wondering how she’d effectively teach students who believed themselves both incapable and unworthy. As Leander & Zacher point out in their important examination of the social spaces of teaching and learning, “the classroom does not merely hold identities placed within it; rather, social practices within the classroom, such as reading and writing, actively produce identities” (138-139).
Contemplating Third Spaces and Multiliteracies

We talked that afternoon about how students know the ways in which they’ve been tracked and how they all too often see school as nothing more than decontextualized rules to memorize and regurgitate. We also pondered how such students might benefit from the construction of their own third space between the sanctioned conventions of standard written English they are supposed to master, what Bakhtin would call authoritative discourse, and their own ways with words, or what he would term internally persuasive discourse (Bakhtin 342; Shosh, Dialogic Discourse 54). The Pennsylvania System of School Assessment examination, for example, requires students to produce on-demand traditional school-based forms like the five-paragraph essay, but the students are often far more interested in communicating their thoughts to an authentic audience using contemporary digital media.

Some pre-service teachers in our seminar took the position that students must do what the officially sanctioned academic curriculum deems important, period. Others noted that in the world outside of school, students are immersed in electronic forms of communication and therefore should be given every possible opportunity to use these media, especially to keep them interested in otherwise mundane school tasks. Still others argued for the creation of a hybrid third space, where students might use Google, Utube, Wikipedia, Twitter, and blogs, for example, and discuss how the unique conventions of each medium were similar to and different from the conventions governing required school forms.

What would happen, we wondered, if we intentionally created a series of third spaces in which traditionally marginalized students, pre-service teachers at various stages
within their teacher preparation program, a classroom teacher, and a college-based
teacher researcher engaged in dialogue to create a relevant contemporary, technological,
and academic curriculum? We believe that secondary school students at all levels of
expertise can and will demonstrate engagement in their learning and achieve high
academic standards when they are provided with the opportunity to co-create a rich,
meaningful curriculum that supports their right to their own language and empowers
them to tell and analyze the stories of their own lived experiences. Rather than delivering
the sanctioned English curriculum with its discrete bits of vocabulary, grammar, and five
paragraph essays—what James Moffett would undoubtedly call the ‘particle’ approach—
we envisioned our English language arts classroom as a writing workshop and studio
where we would mentor one another in the production of digital documentaries to tell our
own stories of life in post industrial Bethlehem (4).

We wanted to co-construct with our students a series of third spaces for authentic
learning at the intersection of often competing and conflicting discourses, where teacher
talk and student talk meet, where personal interests intersect with the needs of our
community, and where what students know and are able to do is extended and supported
by a more knowledgeable other, who learns as well as teaches. I suspect that none of us
envisioned third spaces in exactly the same way, but we did find useful descriptions in
the literature of a “space of regulated confrontation” (Bordieu 374), “in between space”
(Bhabha 38), “contact zone” (Pratt as reported in Bizzell 738), and the notion of the
“zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky 86). We agree with Gutiérrez, Rymes, and
Larson who state that, “The only space where a true interaction or communication
between teacher and student can occur… is in the middle ground, or ‘third space,’ in
which a Bakhtinian social heteroglossia is possible” (447). Perhaps most useful to us in beginning our own inquiry was the work of Moje and her colleagues, who note that, “In third space, then, what seem to be oppositional categories can actually work together to generate new knowledges, new Discourses, and new forms of literacy” (42).

Developing meaningful dialogue between teachers, students, pre-service teachers, and teacher educators within a third space took on an added sense of urgency for us in an urban community where the public high schools are in “corrective action” for not having met annual yearly progress under No Child Left Behind legislation. In the last century, the residents of our community forged the steel that built America. From the skyline of New York City to San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge, Bethlehem Steel forms the skeleton of much of urban America. Today our students live in the shadow of the now dormant blast furnace, which serves as a constant reminder to us that traditional educational practices designed for a bygone era are insufficient to meet the needs of today’s learners. Taking a multiliteracies approach, we would attempt to negotiate a curriculum that would honor and promote a multiplicity of discourses (New London Group 61). As literacy educator Robert J. Tierney explains,

being literate is no longer finding the right book or writing a set of papers in a particular genre to specifications. It is not simply learning to master a set of skills such as decoding or comprehension or being able to retrieve certain information about characters and plots of narrative or informational texts. Being literate involves research and development as well as collaboration and community engagement. Being literate requires learners who are designers and public intellectuals.” (33)
Building Bridges Between Discourse Communities

The eleven young men and nine young women with whom we worked in a tenth grade extended English classroom represented the ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of the larger Bethlehem community. These students had all scored “basic” or “below basic” on their Pennsylvania System of School Assessment examination and therefore were required to take English for an hour and a half each day of the entire academic year, but most spoke both English and Spanish fluently, and as digital natives, they also brought a facility for using the digital tools that would allow us to communicate what we learned with a wider audience.

Like the young woman who described herself as one of the “all retarded children,” the young people enrolled in this course were not there by choice but rather had been assigned to this section of the course in the school district’s desire to provide remediation that would move students to a “proficient” level of performance and, in turn, help to remove the high school from the state’s corrective action list. Teachers throughout the school felt enormous pressure to “give students the basic skills they would need,” but unlike the low-level skill and drill instruction Dorthea Anagnostopoulos describes in Chicago schools or the dearth of technology made available to lower-tracked students that Kathy Mills’s found in her ethnographic study of Australian literacy practices, Ms. Jennifer Wescoe, the classroom teacher was empowered to support students as she saw fit in a technologically-rich environment, including a Macintosh laptop computer for each student.
Ms. Wescoe welcomed the opportunity to partner with Moravian College English education students, and together she and I explored partnership models and grant funding opportunities. In their study of ten Chicago school-university partnerships, including five that were voluntary and five that were required to enhance student achievement at schools placed on probation, Borthwick and her colleagues found that participating teachers, principals, and university-based partners valued the enhanced professional development opportunities, additional resources, increased networking, and support provided to public school students as a result of their partnerships.

In their review of the school-university collaboration literature, Ravid and Handler found four distinct collaborative models, including professional development school, consultation, one-to-one collaboration, and an umbrella model in which multiple project teams worked under the aegis of a single organization. “In one-to-one collaborations, a university faculty member works as an equal partner with a school-based practitioner. Both partners plan and carry out the research project” (8). Here, we would borrow the one-to-one collaborative model but provide support for Moravian College senior English education major Kelly Steward to design a multiliteracy third space curriculum. Junior Kelly Uhas would coordinate fellow college volunteers to lead a video production workshop and to chaperone students on a film shoot throughout the city.

In her construction of a third space curriculum for what we began to call “the Bethlehem Project,” Steward sought to “build bridges from knowledges and Discourses often marginalized in school settings to the learning of conventional academic knowledges and Discourses” (Moje, et al. 43). Students began by viewing and critiquing digital documentaries produced by members of the San Fernando Education Technology
Team in California for their student-produced I-Can film festival (Kist 62). They analyzed how fellow high school students had effectively made an argument and communicated that argument to a specific target audience through the interplay of multimedia tools. Students examined how “digital video composing is a quintessential multimodal literacy that allows orchestration of visual, aural, kinetic, and verbal modes electronically” (Miller 66).

As they concurrently read and discussed Laurie Halse Anderson’s young adult novel Speak, they gave voice to their own concerns about redevelopment plans for the former Bethlehem Steel site, which at the time was America’s largest brown field. To learn more, they read local newspaper and on-line accounts of the Steel, its history, and new construction options that included a community arts center, a Smithsonian affiliated Museum of Industrial History, a Public Broadcasting System studio, and a Sands Casino resort and hotel. The more students read and viewed, the more they wrote, sharing their own excitement of new uses for land lying along the Lehigh River and adjacent to many of their homes in South Bethlehem. They also shared their fears of rising real estate prices forcing them out of the homes some of their families rented in turn-of-the-century tenements on the periphery of the Bethlehem Steel property.

Crossing and Re-Crossing Bridges to Create Transcendent Scripts

As powerful as such learning opportunities ultimately proved to be, they were not always easy to create, and Steward, as a pre-service teacher, quickly came to experience classroom dialogue in which teacher and student goals did not overlap, especially when she found herself putting the Bethlehem Project on hold to teach school-sanctioned
vocabulary, grammar, and other required test-preparation lessons. Gutiérrez notes that, “When a true dialogue between students and teachers occurs, rather than random associations between their scripts, a new transitional, less rigidly scripted space — the third space — is created” (452). Fostering such dialogue, what Gutiérrez would call a “transcendent script” required much reflection in, on, and for new action as carefully prepared lessons sometimes failed to engage students in the hoped for dialogue (Schön, Hendricks). After writing in her own reflective journal about how much students enjoyed viewing multimedia productions designed by fellow students, Steward went on to challenge herself to keep engaging her students dialogically:

In critiquing my own performance and planning of this lesson, I realize that I needed to make the connection between the ICan film examples and the Bethlehem project much clearer. By reviewing their class-work, I learned that most students understood that they were to focus upon how the film was put together. However, it is important that I help the students go deeper than that. Therefore, if I had provided more specific information about camera angles prior to showing the films, I would have focused the students’ viewing and helped them to watch the films more critically.

Tomorrow, we will watch another San Fernando video and discuss specific filming techniques used in the example as well as how students should utilize the same techniques as they move into filming their own interviews with the Bethlehem community leaders.

When Steward invited Bethlehem’s Southside Film Festival Director Graham Stanford to share film clips with the class after watching and critiquing the San Fernando
clips, he asked the students to tell him about the films they would make. The class had not yet contemplated this question together, and breaking an uncomfortable silence, one student exclaimed, “Yo mister, we don’t make films. We watch them. That’s why you’re here. What are you gonna show us?” Ms. Steward, Ms. Wescoe, and I exchanged knowing glances, worried that Mr. Stanford would think less of our students—and of us—because he clearly had not received the answer from our students that he had expected. Moje notes that, “A second view is that of third space as a navigational space, a way of crossing and succeeding in different discourse communities” (44). For our students to succeed in the larger community, we’d need to design explicit instruction on code-switching, or using the expected and sanctioned discourse patterns to meet a speaker’s needs and a listener’s expectations, a prime topic for developing third space curriculum.

To do so, we wouldn’t resort to canned textbook lessons on the conventions of so-called standard English, but instead we would create opportunities to engage in “wrighting” or crafting critical literacy through drama (Shosh, Wrighting, Empty Space). Students used the newspaper and on-line research they had conducted to participate in one of two drama-in-education scenarios: either a formal debate, siding for or against the Sands Casino Project, or participating in a mock city council meeting taking place five years in the future in which students took on the role of community members explaining how they had been affected both for better and for worse by the redevelopment of the Bethlehem Steel site.

Students needed to think about their own positions on community economic redevelopment and determine through their role play how different members of the
community would most likely be affected now and in the future. In preparing to
dramatize the role of Bethlehem Mayor John Callahan, for example, Orlando not only
read on-line newspaper articles but also downloaded video clips of the mayor promoting
redevelopment, including the proposed Casino project. Students also had to imagine not
only how the lives of different members of our community would be transformed, but
also how they would share their thoughts publicly in ways that would be considered
appropriate at a City Council meeting.

With the role play as a spring board, students decided who in the community they
would go on to interview in order to compose digital documentaries of this particular
moment in our community’s history. Working individually, with a partner, or within a
triad, students agreed to prepare to conduct interviews with representatives from the
following community businesses and organizations:

1. Bethlehem Boys’ Club
2. Pinnacle Century 21 Realty
3. Hillside Obgyn Associates
4. Lehigh University Spokesperson
5. Mayor’s Office
6. Patty’s Petals Flower Shop
7. Recycled/Earth Friendly Art and Furniture
8. St. Luke’s Hospital
9. STAR Tutoring Program
10. Touchstone Theatre
Clearly, the students’ choices reflected a range of interests, and allowing such choice was instrumental to engaging students in both traditional and multimodal classroom literacy activities. Students connected directly to community organizations that mattered to them now, whether the Boys’ Club, the STAR Tutoring Program, St. Luke’s Hospital, or the Hillside Obgyn Associates. They also saw a future for themselves in the community as realtors, florists, medical professionals, college students, community leaders, and artists. Classroom instruction, whether focused on writing a letter of invitation for a filmed interview or analyzing camera angles mattered to students only in terms of helping them meet their own goals and objectives. It was the conversations that emerged about their own interests that classroom discourse patterns most resembled authentic conversation, for “it is in this unscripted third space that student and teacher cultural interests, or internal dialogizations, become available to each other, where actual cross-cultural communication is possible, and where public artifacts…are available for critique and contestation” (Gutiérrez 465).

Going Public to Learn More About Others and Our Own Possibilities

Accompanying student written requests for filmed interviews were letters further explaining the Bethlehem Project to local community leaders, business owners, and organizational representatives. Because students were writing to a self-selected audience for an authentic purpose, they wanted their letters to follow the conventions of standard written English expected in formal or business settings, and they eagerly anticipated a response. As students drafted, revised, and peer edited their letters, they continued to read
and discuss Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak* and to use internet resources to find the specific organizational contacts to whom they would address their queries.

Ms. Steward designed and presented a series of mini lessons to help students brainstorm interview questions, to interview one another, to evaluate professional television interviews, and to prepare to conduct a digitally filmed interview on-site at the contact organization. While nearly all contacts agreed to be interviewed and were supportive of the students and their project, a few were unavailable but suggested alternate contacts within their organizations. We knew that when the time came, we would need to leave the school environment and film on location. Bringing a sanctioned school project into students’ home community mattered a great deal to them. Michelle Fine and her colleagues helped us to realize that the construction of third spaces within the classroom also invites “the study of meaningful spaces [outside the classroom], geographically centralized or dispersed over time and space, historically constituted or currently created, in which people, potentially across all ages, come together to critique what is, shelter themselves from what has been, redesign what might be, and/or imagine what could be” (133).

Most interviews were scheduled and filmed on a single production day, where teams of students, joined by a Moravian College pre-service teaching volunteers, traversed the South Bethlehem community contiguous to the Steel complex. As groups reviewed their storyboards and interview questions, they debated how best to set up their shots and tested microphones by filming one another before meeting their official contacts at their respective sites. College junior Katie Uhas, who coordinated her fellow pre-service teaching volunteers, commented:
I worked with a group of students who were labeled as being underachievers, strugglers, and behavior problems, and I was able to watch them excel. Intrinsically motivated by such a thoughtful, interactive project, they became overachievers, asking those they interviewed complex questions and going beyond the assignment in every way. The value of engaging students in academic work that can be applied to the real world and has a real world audience became obvious to me. The students I worked with were and had always been capable but chose to apply themselves to this project in particular because it had meaning for them and for others.

Here Uhas and her fellow pre-service teachers had the opportunity to walk through the neighborhoods of South Bethlehem, the students’ turf—not their own—and learn what it means to be a teacher in dialogue with their students. “Finally,” Moje points out, “third space can be viewed as a space of cultural, social, and epistemological change in which the competing knowledges and Discourses of different spaces are brought into ‘conversation’ to challenge and reshape both academic content literacy practices and the knowledges and Discourses of youths’ everyday lives” (44).

After a morning spent shooting film footage on location, students returned to the Moravian College campus for lunch in a college dining hall and a workshop on digital documentary production by college art and design majors. College students shared excerpts of their own footage, discussed some of their editing techniques, and invited students to continue their film production work in college. Moshe Barak points out in his examination of school and university partnerships designed to benefit traditionally under-
represented populations in Israeli higher education, “Cooperation with the university is significant to a school not only from the perspective of improving learning design, but also by imparting to pupils, teachers and parents the notion that university study is not beyond the scope of their pupils” (55).

Reflecting in the Shadow of the Blast Furnace

As students celebrated the success of production day and pondered just how they’d actually edit what they’d shot on location, I had the opportunity to turn the camera on the students and their teachers to discover what they had learned as a result of participating in the Bethlehem Project. Here the printed words are not nearly as powerful as the video clips available in the Bethlehem Project Digital Archive, underscoring Kathy Mills’ point that “To continue to teach to a narrow band of print-based genres, grammars and skills is to ignore the reality of textual practices outside of schools. Students must be free to engage in new and multimodal textual practices, rather than simply reproduce a tightly confined set of linguistic conventions” (108). As students and teachers ate, drank, smiled, and laughed together, they also reflected:

LaShawn: It was pretty amazing because I actually got to know another side of the business. I had never been to Touchstone Theatre before. It also gave me a heads up on how to talk to people and how to do interviews. It even helped me to be calm on camera.

Orlando: The mayor said everything I expected. He’s a hard-working guy, and I got to hang out on his balcony.
Joey: I interviewed my cousin. He works at Century 21 Pinnacle, and the Casinos really will affect our city. Real estate will make a lot more money, so he’s in favor of the Casinos coming to Bethlehem.

Henry: It was interesting meeting a person who owned his own business. Since I want to be a chef one day, maybe I can own my own business too.

Ms. Steward: My involvement in the project inspired me to one day be a leader in using new technology, even when that task seems quite daunting. The project also demonstrated the value of stepping outside the boundaries of a school building and involving the rich resources of one’s unique community. Finally, participating in the Bethlehem Project challenged me to view teaching and assessment in a different way: in short, the more authentic the learning activities, the better. We should not limit ourselves to having our students writing or creating things for hypothetical situations; why not ask students to actually produce something personally meaningful for a real audience?

Ms. Wescoe: We learned to expect logistical and technological challenges. Our cameras weren’t compatible with our software. Despite our best efforts, not everyone could conduct interviews today. Some of our footage was lost by taping over it. BUT... Students read. They wrote. They role-played. They thought critically as they
interviewed community leaders, and they engaged in a process that mattered a great deal to them.

In this, our first foray into the world of digital video documentary production, we failed to take into account just how much time and support students would need to turn their storyboards and raw footage into finished products. Of course, our experience as process-based teachers of writing should have clued us into the fact that developing a final product for an outside audience always takes longer than we initially imagine it will. Preparations for the District’s mandatory end-of-year testing competed with our best intentions, and the end of the school year came all too quickly—as it always does. We had, at least for a while, succeeded in creating third spaces in the shadow of the blast furnace, but we were still part of a larger system that demanded a different kind of accountability. King and O’Brien note that:

In three ways, classroom practices may limit literacy. First, a limited range of acceptable cognitive tasks may manifest literacy in print-based contexts and on canonical texts. Second, certain participation structures organize what can count as school literacy. Third, the execution of sanctioned tasks that must be completed within specified social contexts may limit students’ performance and teachers’ view of their competence. The wider the acceptable range for these options becomes, the greater the possibility that meaningful multiliteracies may occur.” (48)

We had set out with James Moffett as our intellectual and spiritual mentor to teach the universe of discourse in a third space at least temporarily free from the sanctions of No Child Left Behind legislation. Together, we attempted to create an
holistic, discourse-based curriculum with our students; to see our own community through new lenses as we read, discussed, and constructed both conventional and multimedia texts; and to engage in dialogue to learn from one another and to share what we learned with a wider audience. Following the guidance of the New London Group, we attempted to situate our practice in the physical and figurative discourses of the Bethlehem community; to provide contextualized overt instruction where necessary to teach students the design of interpersonal communication; to collaborate with our students to help them critically frame issues of importance to us all; and to transform practice through the conscious creation of third spaces inside and outside the classroom (88). Information literacy educator John Buschman notes, “Reflective critical practice and the reading of ‘texts’ (in all their multiplicity of forms) is a crucial and worthy goal, fundamental to core notions of an educated citizenry” (112).

We realize, of course, that we were only partially successful at meeting our goals. Students told us that they liked participating in the Bethlehem Project far more than most school projects, especially role-playing a city council meeting, critiquing student-produced video clips, conducting interviews, exploring the city’s Southside, being “on their own” with college students, watching film festival and college student video clips, and visiting the Moravian College campus. They reported not liking the research writing activities we had designed, being on camera, listening to lectures, or doing “regular” class work. By the start of the next academic year, two students had moved, two had dropped out of school, and sixteen had entered heterogeneously grouped eleventh grade American literature survey courses—we hope, more confident in themselves and their abilities.
As we plan our next round of third space exploration, we realize that continuing to collaborate with our students to become multiliterate is no longer an option but an implicit part of our work as English language arts teachers. Nelson reminds us that while “we associate new media with youth agency and with some good reason, since these make available potent forms of communication until recently reserved for the elite, and, complementarily, kids quite naturally gravitate toward them…, it is a mistake to naively assume that new media bestow the power to communicate freely, without constraints, for anyone, but especially of course for kids” (437). Of course, we teach print literacy precisely because of the power the written word, and in today’s society, the written word is most often used in tandem with carefully designed images that our students need both to critique and to create. As we shot footage on location, we couldn’t help but discuss the dormant Steel plant as a metaphor for a traditional education that no longer meets the needs of today’s students. While we must continue to be the stewards of a rich cultural heritage, we must also use new tools that are meaningful and relevant today because they look ahead to the world we’re building for tomorrow. Wherever we teach and learn, we must seek to co-construct multiliteracies in a third space.
Works Cited


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