



Seats of Authority

As a teacher in an urban alternative high school in “as dispossessed a neighborhood as the United States can produce” (p. 48), Eli Goldblatt (1995) was taken aback when he went to speak to a friend’s class in a very well-to-do suburban private school. Coming from a school with “holes in the floorboards and graffiti on the outside walls” (p. 48), Goldblatt was struck by the finely manicured, expansive grounds and the well-appointed buildings. But what he remembered most about his visit was the seating arrangement. In the class he visited, students sat around a colloquium table in captain’s chairs, each emblazoned with the school seal.

Goldblatt (1995) does not use this detail simply to illustrate the economic differences between the two schools. Rather he uses it to flesh out the central theoretical point of his book: Authority in literate activity, that is, the expectation that what someone has to say will be attended to by others, is a function of one’s institutional affiliations. What those captain’s chairs told the students in the private school was that they read and wrote and spoke as representatives of the school, that the school had vested its institutional authority in them. Moreover, the chairs were emblematic of

other institutions upon which the prep school students could draw: the positions their family members occupied in boardrooms, stock exchanges, and other seats of privilege and power.

In contrast, Goldblatt’s (1995) students faced two significant problems when it came to being provided institutional authority for their literate activity. Drawing on Du Bois’s (1997) notion of *double consciousness*, Goldblatt explains how in looking at themselves through the eyes of the dominant culture, his students did not believe their home institutions had sufficient authority in academic settings to offer them effective support for their literate activity. And because of their perception of this home-school separation, they did not identify strongly enough with school to draw on its authority for support of their literate activity.

Brandt (1998, 2001) makes a similar argument about the importance of institutional support for literate activity, though she focuses primarily on institutions outside school. Through her examination of the literacy histories of a large and diverse group of adults, she develops the construct of *sponsors* of literacy. According to Brandt, sponsors of literacy are “any agents, local or

distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (2001, p. 19). She illustrates this construct with an analysis of the impact of a wide variety of sponsors—businesses, government agencies, churches, unions, and more—on the lives of her participants. According to Brandt, sponsors have an impact on schools in a number of ways. The most direct impact is that sponsors influence the curricular materials that schools have available. But of greater concern to Brandt are the inequalities that are a function of individuals’ having more or less powerful sponsors, a concern that resonates powerfully with Goldblatt’s (1995) work. Although Brandt recognizes the power of sponsors outside the school, she argues that one of the jobs of schools is to mitigate the impact of the differing power of the sponsors outside school by becoming sponsors in their own right, by redistributing “their considerable material powers and intellectual resources to equalize life chances” (2001, p. 45).

In short, Goldblatt (1995) and Brandt (1998, 2001) provide compelling theoretical lenses through which to understand both the unequal institutional capital that students bring with them to school and the potential for schools to address that inequality. Their work provides a challenge for schools and for teachers to acknowledge “how often the literacy skills that exist in American lives languish for lack of adequate sponsorship” (Brandt, 2001, p. 207) and to do what they can to

provide that sponsorship. But if schools and teachers are to meet that challenge, they will have to provide curricula and instruction that overcome students’ feelings of alienation and replace them with feelings of affiliation. We see the concerns that Goldblatt and Brandt discuss explored in the research of Ann Penrose, the first article in this issue, and some promising avenues for addressing those concerns both in the research of Eurydice Bouchereau Bauer and Georgia Earnest García and in the research of Maureen Boyd and Donald Rubin.

Motivated by case study reports of first-generation students’ discomfort in the academic community, Penrose’s quantitative comparison of the performance and perceptions of first-generation and continuing-generation students finds that first-generation students differ from their continuing-generation peers in general academic preparedness, in retention rates, and in their perceptions of their academic literacy skills. Interestingly, however, the groups did not differ significantly in college performance. She argues that her data suggest that first-generation students have difficulty forging academic identities. According to Penrose, their feeling of not belonging accounts for lower retention rates rather than differences in performance. Penrose’s research, then, jibes with that of Goldblatt (1995) and Brandt (1998, 2001) and raises the question of what teachers and administrators can do to make it more likely that students are able to draw on the authority of their academic institution in meaningful ways. The other two articles in this issue offer hope that this

problem can be addressed from the beginning of students' academic lives.

Eurydice Bouchereau Bauer and Georgia Earnest García suggest that authentic assessment might be a tool in this effort. In their case study of a grade 1–2 teacher, they investigate the possible link between a classroom teacher's implementation of alternative literacy assessment and her classroom instruction. They find that the assessment changes that the teacher made led to instructional changes with the result of greater student equity. More specifically, they find that the changes in assessment led to an increase in the number of students who received instruction that was responsive to their literacy needs (educational equity), that provided an accurate depiction of what they could and could not do (assessment equity), and that provided them greater voice in their literacy development (empowerment equity). This increase in equity seems to us to make it much more likely that students would feel sponsored by school with the result that they could draw on their school's authority in their literate activity.

In the final article, Maureen Boyd and Donald Rubin elucidate conditions that encourage substantively engaged student talk by students who are learning English as a second or other language. They focus on student critical turns, a construct developed by Boyd that describes lengthy conversational turns in which students respond to and in turn elicit response from other students. These turns are far more elaborated than the brief remarks that researchers have consistently found to

typify students' contributions in school discussions of all sorts. Their analysis demonstrates how the teacher created a climate that engendered student critical turns by facilitating interpretation, especially through the strategic placement of questions. They argue for the importance of teachers' intervening to create classroom contexts that make it clear to students that their ideas and interpretations are valued. Of particular significance is their study's focus on nonnative speakers, who seem especially vulnerable to the problem of disassociation given their likely feelings of alienation in entering a new national culture. The identification of student critical turns and the strategic use of teacher discourse to promote them have potential for encouraging greater feelings of affiliation and sponsorship for students who might believe that they do not speak on behalf of their schools and communities.

One of the definitions of seat is "a right to the privileges of membership." When the private school that Goldblatt (1995) describes provided captain's chairs for its students, it provided them a seat in the culture of power, a physical manifestation of their rights as members of that culture. As Penrose argues, many students do not feel they have those rights in the culture of the academy. They do not feel they belong, and as a consequence they leave. It would be frivolous and impractical to suggest that new chairs could solve these problems. But Bauer and García and Boyd and Rubin propose other ways to "seat" students: careful attention to them as individuals and consistent

encouragement to articulate their ideas. Such teaching, we think, will authorize students as important and respected members of their school institutions.

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References

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