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IN DEFENSE OF PLAYFULNESS

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“SHHHH. Follow me!” Bruce didn’t wait for a response. He sprinted to a nearby oak and hid behind it.¹

“No—Follow ME!” Kim retorted, diving behind a bush. To my surprise, the rest of our eleventh-grade American Literature class followed suit, hiding in the woods around us. Some mimicked their leaders’ slapstick camouflage routine more eagerly than others, but they all participated—and laughed. It was a start.

Now my usually “cool” students were prowling the woods, giggling self-consciously. Though I had often witnessed students responding positively to group activities, I remained amazed when the class followed playfully. That mood carried into the activity itself, which had been designed to frustrate individual effort and encourage group success. The activity required students to traverse sections of wire cable strung two feet above ground, zigzagging among several trees. After I described safety guidelines, the boys turned the activity into individual tests of cable-walking prowess. Only when a usually quiet girl suggested creating a human chain did a breakthrough occur. She questioned the boys’ assumptions that they needed to cross the cable expanses on their own. Her question allowed the group to try a new organizational scheme and, after trial and error, helped them succeed.

In this article I will consider what might seem the least important aspect of what had occurred: playfulness. I will develop a defense of playfulness within schooling, especially within reading and literacy instruction. I do this in response to the accountability and testing measures many schools across the nation have embraced, eschewing playful pedagogy in favor of such “serious” methods as direct instruction and test preparation (Cornbleth, 2008; Cuban, 2007; Dillon, 2006; Pedula et al., 2003; Pressler, 2006). The previous vignette occurred twelve years ago when I taught high school English; it troubles me that if I were teaching today, I might not be allowed to take an English class into the woods. This concern arises from accounts I read and hear now as a teacher educator in North Carolina. My students report that their schools have increased the time spent on language arts and mathematics instruction, at the expense of subjects associated with playfulness: art, music, and physical education. Such narrowing may happen

¹ This and subsequent student names are pseudonyms

throughout the year or episodically during periods of focused test preparation. My students' experiences reflect national reports; their schools devote instructional time solely to subject-specific test prep in the weeks prior to state-mandated tests.

While it is common for elementary school teachers to spend more time on literacy, many are also specifically required to follow prescriptive "pacing guides" that mandate content and instructional strategies, thereby limiting or eliminating playful engagement with literacy (Cornbleth, 2008; Cuban, 2007; Dillon, 2006; Pedula et al., 2003; Pressler, 2006). Secondary school teachers may not have to use the same sorts of preapproved curricular materials, but subject-area mandates are so tightly packed that many high school instructors limit their instructional strategies to lectures, drills, and tests, with no space for innovation, student engagement, or playfulness. As Nolan and Anyon (2004) argue, these practices foster "regimented and superficial rote learning in schools serving students who have historically underachieved on standardized tests, that is, African Americans and other students of color" (p. 141). Even schools enrolling affluent, middle class students increasingly adopt the prescriptive teaching methods and curricula associated with mandated assessment (Cuban, 2007; Dillon, 2006; Pedula et al., 2003; Pressler, 2006).

Into the Woods

Such prescription is particularly problematic within the context of literacy instruction: it effectively restricts literacy to decoding texts and symbols. In the current climate, I would most likely be pressured to remain focused on test prep and curriculum coverage, despite the fact that the cable-walking activity was connected to the curriculum. It occurred during an analysis of Olsen's *I Stand Here Ironing*, a short story in which a single mother reflects on her struggles to raise her daughter. The mother describes her enduring love for her now nineteen-year-old daughter, despite the difficult decisions she had to make as a single parent. The mother's acquiescence when social workers wanted to institutionalize the girl especially troubled my students. The story inspired many intense personal reactions. One male student remarked that the mother was irresponsible and shouldn't have been allowed to have children. In response, many girls attacked him for his lack of understanding. This incited other boys to defend their friend, angrily objecting that charges of sexism are overblown relics of the past. After unsuccessfully trying to negotiate some discussion boundaries, I decided to change approaches. The atmosphere in the classroom was too tense to allow the students

to examine sexism and gender issues together. Hence, I took American Literature to the woods.

I wasn't surprised that my students had personal reactions. Reading is a personal act. Gee (1996, p. 128) argues that literacy involves more than merely possessing the skills to decode text; it taps into ways of interacting with the world that run deeply into socially mediated senses of identity. Olsen's story tapped into my students' struggles to define themselves as gendered people negotiating the adolescence-adulthood border. Tension was an inevitable and welcomed part of the expanded notion of literacy instruction guiding my teaching. Critical projects move beyond traditional reasoned analysis to help students make judgments about the personal and the political—connecting reading and writing with examinations of power and political issues that are highly personal. On the surface I was inviting them to critically analyze the gendered content of Olsen's story, but I was also asking them to consider their own gendered identities and ways of being in the world. Some resisted because the performance of such analysis entails confusing and potentially identity-altering tasks.

I return to the playful cable-walking outing because I worry that today's schools deny students opportunities to explore complex textual practices that help them understand themselves and their sociocultural worlds. Such opportunities are especially important for marginalized students, since research demonstrates that they describe school as a place where they either go to find or to lose themselves (Reay, 1997; 2001; 2002). Reducing literacy instruction to textual decoding, and divorcing it from the analyses of linguistic and literacy practices we find in our cultural contexts, helps students whose home preparation matches the skills and codes of the classroom to "find themselves." It also leads those whose home experiences differ from experiences offered by the school to see themselves as unequal and undervalued. The former are described as bright, the latter as "problem" students, who may come to understand themselves as not "belonging" in school (Brantlinger, 2003). This widens the achievement gap and enables us to blame students for their inadequacies, rather than to examine how schools define academic knowledge and sanction particular literacy practices.

By inviting my students into the woods, weaving fantasies for them and inviting them to play together, I intentionally laid the ground for classroom playfulness. Playfulness has the potential to create the background condition necessary for the complex analysis that moves between texts, individual identities, and socio-cultural power relationships. Our discussion about interacting on the wire cables

and the assumptions about social rules began a more complex discussion of gender norms and how they govern interactions in our daily lives. Playfulness alone, or an activity like cable walking, was not a sufficient basis for examining sexism, but it supported more complex thinking by providing a vehicle for ongoing critical work. We carried that analysis of the “rules” into our ongoing textual examinations of other topics like race, social class, and homosexuality. But there is more to be said about the relationship of playfulness and critical approaches to literacy. In what follows, I turn to Sutton-Smith (1997, 2001, 2003) and Lugones (1987) to argue that my students’ playfulness is a first step toward establishing more open and fluid analyses of complex sociocultural issues like sexism.

Play, Playfulness, and Critical Literacy

First, a distinction must be drawn between the activity of play and play as an *attitude*. As Sutton-Smith (1997, 2001, 2003) argues, the two are often conflated, leading to confusion. This may stem from the problem of defining play. Play is an ambiguous concept, and as a result, it can represent the different hopes and beliefs of those who draw on the idea of play to advance their disparate aims. Defining the spirit of play—playfulness—is less daunting, although one could still argue that definitions of playfulness emerge from particular sociocultural contexts. In any case, I agree with Sutton-Smith that playfulness is concerned with “meta-play”; it “plays with the frames of play” (p. 147). As such, I define playfulness as an *attitude of creative rule engagement*.

For example, although childhood play is commonly viewed as wildly spontaneous and unconstrained, research shows that all play is marked by consistency and reference to agreed-upon rules that define boundaries for action. Adults play tennis using specific rules; similarly, when children play imaginative games, they do so within the implicitly agreed-upon play rules that sustain the play framework. We should not equate playfulness with an absence of rules, because it describes a stance *toward* rules: to the extent that they contribute to a specific instance of play’s creation, rules are viewed as useful. Otherwise, they are mutable. This was a key to the link between critical literacy and our cable-crossing experience. I presented students with only enough rules to sustain the activity. The rules they then established became as influential as the ones I had given them. For example, one section offered a fixed hand rope to aid their progress. Unfortunately, the rope’s position relative to the group’s starting angle made it more a hindrance than a help. The boys insisted the group had to use the rope,

that it was part of the challenge itself. The girls countered by offering a different conceptualization: if they abandoned the rope—altering a perceived rule—the activity became one that turned from an emphasis on individual skill to the service of group success. The boys’ view of immutable rules defined the nature of their experience and success, while the girls playfully questioned the boys’ assumptions.

Our discussion after the cable activity centered on the gendered rule-based assumptions that students brought to that challenge. I wish that this one activity had heralded a new era in gender relationships in my classroom; it did not. However, it began a process in which we examined the rules governing gender within our classroom, the school, and our community, and considered the influences of those rules on students’ understandings of themselves as gendered people. The activity helped us examine how unwritten social rules influence how we perceive ourselves and what is possible to think and to do. We used textual resources and other activities to extend such analyses, and continuously returned to the metaphor of the cable crossing to represent the need to examine rules about gender in any given context. This reveals the importance of playfulness to critical literacy: throughout our engagement, I hoped to help students develop a more fluid understanding of fixed gender rules, and to allow them to approach such analysis playfully. Thus, Sutton-Smith’s definition of playfulness—an attitude toward creative rule engagement—entails an epistemological position inviting students to analyze how rules support or hinder what happens in social spaces.

I contend that the current context for schooling makes developing such an epistemological outlook more difficult. Current policies that embrace prescriptive, test-focused instruction seemingly lead to embracing an epistemological stance that school policies and academic curricular “rules” are sacrosanct and immutable. Test-driven classrooms stress specific educational practices, denying opportunities to negotiate the rules governing academic inquiry. In contrast, a playful approach views school policies and curricular “rules” as serving the larger aim of academic inquiry and remaining flexible and revisable. Our playful approach to American Literature, for example, left much of what we studied and how we studied open for negotiation. Again, using the cable-challenge metaphor, we continued negotiating our way through the curriculum—examining different assumptions about curricular and school “rules” that we each brought to our collective engagement with each other. That meant I had to be open to revising and/or dropping aspects of the curriculum I had established.

Becoming World Travelers

Embracing the playful approach to engaging with the rules of the many games we play together in our social and text-based worlds invites students to see themselves as what Lugones (1987) calls *world travelers*, who understand how specific social contexts provide resources for being different sorts of people. “Those of us who are ‘world’-travelers have the distinct experience of being different in different ‘worlds’ and of having the capacity to remember other “worlds” and ourselves in them” (p. 11). For example, when I asked my students to read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as playful world travelers, they engaged with the text on personal levels, reflecting on racism, the demands of friendship, and what it would be like to be either Jim or Huck traveling on that particular raft. Reading in this way means that we are not satisfied with interpretative details, or with decoding and what Clinchy (1994) calls separate knowing. Instead, we want to explore subjectivities revealed to us in their complex existential fecundity, and to use such experiences to explore our own subjectivities and the rules that define them. An important goal here is to reveal how those rules influence both who we become and the social rules guiding the “games” we play together.

It is here we see a profoundly troubling aspect of the accountability movement’s prescriptive schooling that reduces complex academic literary study to textual decoding. We fail to provide students with opportunities to analyze the connections between differing social contexts and different types of literacy practices and how those contexts and practices intersect with aspects of how they understand themselves as people and students. Standardized exams are literary practices, powerful ones regulating classroom interactions by driving teachers to limited literacy explorations, eschewing playful, critical engagements with texts.

The importance of such engaged playfulness forming the background for serious critical inquiry becomes even clearer when we reconsider Reay’s (2001) argument that marginalized students often internalize the message that they are unfinished and incomplete in some way. They turn to school to “find themselves” without realizing how school is implicated in their losses. Instead, in the Foucauldian sense, they may discipline themselves to become the students that schools value, or failing to do so, internalize pernicious beliefs about themselves. We see this in the words of a sixth grader who scores a below-normal test score on a major grade-level exam. The girl defines herself as the score; she states: “I’m a 3, 3, 3,” then remarking that she is a “nothing.” Like my students who understood their beliefs about gender rules to be immutable, this girl’s beliefs about her-

self need to be challenged. I argue that we need to embed such work within a comprehensively playful epistemology that spans the curriculum and helps students see how rules influence the people they become.

Playing with Rules

Asking students to engage playfully in learning, both in and outside classrooms, can be justified because it creates an inviting atmosphere or because it may alter relationships among class members. But that misses an additional, important epistemological point: critically playful learning entails examining the rules of play, the rules governing the social engagement students face, including those that govern textual encounters and the topics those texts explore. Critical approaches to literacy can help students examine the intersections of their self-understandings and the varieties of literacy practices in their differing social worlds; it is particularly important to explore tools like the educational labels and tests employed by schools. Playfulness aids such textual and metatextual explorations by helping students engage in textual analyses with creative openness.

As Lugones (1987) describes, we want to invite students to world travel playfully, deeply exploring the subjectivities revealed to us through textual analyses. Furthermore, we can use such experiences to explore our own subjectivities and the rules that define them. An important goal is revealing how social rules influence the people we become and the social games we play. Making the rules of our social engagements visible through the background of playfulness draws our attention to rule mutability and the possibility afforded to those who creatively alter rules to enhance the serious games they play.

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