



Power, Resistance, and Literacy: Writing for Social Justice
By Julie Gorlewski

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Introduction

Education in the United States (US) is entangled in class politics and power, often in ways that remain invisible and ignored. Using critical ethnography to study a high school (given the pseudonym Pontiac) serving White working-class students, Gorlewski makes the pervasive visible by providing a thorough and detailed account of the way neoliberalism has contributed to the production of an educational climate that disconnects and disenfranchises students from the learning process, as well as contributes to class reproduction. While class-based discrimination in schools comes in many forms, Gorlewski focuses on writing. The US educational system relies heavily on the written word for teaching and learning. This focus on literacy shapes how curriculum is developed, implemented, and assessed. The importance of writing, however, extends beyond these technical implications. Gorlewski contends that writing shapes modes of thinking, identity formation, and the imaginings of place in the world. Thus, the ways writing is viewed, presented, and assessed form the foundations not only for how students are educated in this country, but also how they view themselves as students and as people.

Though Gorlewski is committed to illuminating ways that writing instruction for students at Pontiac is disempowering, alienating, and reproductive, she asserts that resistance can and does take place in ways that generate the potential to ameliorate these experiences. Throughout the book, Gorlewski discusses a number of pedagogical strategies, conditions, and orientations that can support the production of equitable learning environments. This book has broad appeal and will be beneficial not only for those researchers and practitioners who are interested in exploring critical questions in education, but also for those who are interested in conceptualizing and practicing empowering pedagogy. In this regard, the book can be especially powerful for in-service and preservice teachers across grade levels and subject domains, as Gorlewski's suggestions for critical literacy pedagogy are applicable to a variety of learning contexts.

The book is organized into two parts. The first part is titled "Power," and each chapter in this section examines theory and research involving the problems inherent in standards-driven education. The second part is titled "Resistance." In these chapters, Gorlewski uses prior research along with the narratives of students and teachers in her study setting to support the assertion that teachers and students in working class communities can and want to have positive learning experiences in schools.

Power and Opportunity

In chapter one, titled “From Neoliberalism to Dialogicality,” Gorlewski situates the writing instruction of Pontiac at the intersection of neoliberal political philosophy, social class, identity, schooling, and literacy pedagogy. Perhaps, the most compelling point of this chapter is Gorlewski’s contention that there is a disconnect between education for “new capitalism” and “old capitalism.” The former requires critical thinking skills, problem solving abilities, and learning dispositions, such as lifelong learning and adaptability. The latter relies on an essentialistic philosophy and is associated with a Fordist assembly line mentality in which individuals must perform in accordance with a script in a prescribed structure. Gorlewski contends that current educational curricula and pedagogy are oriented toward preparing students for old capitalism by teaching “the basics” for the purposes of attaining a certain level of performance on standardized assessments. With the emphasis on standardized assessments, the curriculum narrows “to represent only the knowledge and skills that will be assessed” (p. 7). Critical thinking is de-emphasized because the tests are constructed to measure lower-level cognitive skills. Therefore, these tests limit critical literacy and effective writing instruction by imposing narrow guidelines for what constitutes “good” writing.

In chapter two, Gorlewski begins by iterating her concern for neoliberalism. In particular, she mentions growing social and economic inequities, the concurrent decrease in resources for public schools, and the increase in corporatized State and privatized control over public institutions. In this neoliberal climate, Gorlewski implicates educational policy and practice in the decline of the standard of living for the working class. In the new capitalism, Gorlewski argues that working class identity must shift away from opposition to management toward an identity that requires “an orientation towards lifelong learning and cooperation with colleagues at all levels of the organizational hierarchy” (p. 21). However, the education shaped by high-stakes testing and standardization is in direct opposition to developing this identity.

Gorlewski’s study was designed to examine how a school in a working class community prepares students for new capitalism; how it reproduces or ameliorates inequalities; and if transformation is practiced or is possible in these settings. In making the connection to literacy and literacy instruction, Gorlewski looks at the connections among social class, schooling, and exclusion as mechanisms for class stratification. She contends that because writing is essential to thinking, how a person is taught to write, and the value placed on it, shapes how one thinks; how one conceptualizes can include or exclude one from levels in society. This study was designed “to unpack the multilayered meanings that underlie the daily experiences of students and teachers in this specific setting” (p. 32). Various written documents, observations, and in-depth interviews of teachers and students in classes across the curriculum provided narratives that highlight these issues.

In chapters three and four, Gorlewski elaborates on the relationship between writing, thinking, identity formation, and “imagining one’s place in the world” (p. 41). Empowering the usage of language through writing can move learners beyond seeing themselves as objects defined by others to the liberation of creating their own identities. Gorlewski is concerned with the ways teachers, students, and pedagogical arrangements invite and reify representations of what it means to be an educated person, which has come to mean one who can master middle class discourse in order to perform well on standardized tests. The disconnect between the identity and discourse of poor and working class students and assessment-based schooling with its underlying middle-class norms is reflected in the narratives of the study’s participants as they speak about

the stress, anxiety, and frustration they feel about high-stakes testing and its impact on writing and writing instruction. Teachers' loss of autonomy in planning instruction restricts "their ability to set and measure expectations" (p. 69). In turn students perceive that writing is not about themselves as writers but about meeting state requirements.

In the final chapter of part I, which is titled, "Restricted Literacies," Gorlewski examines the narrowed curriculum that is imposed on teachers and students by high-stakes testing and how it has created "a structured, formulaic approach to writing which does not foster higher cognitive thinking" (p. 84). Test-preparation has become the focus of education, in all content areas, not just in English classes. Writing activities are limited to those that parallel the ones on standardized tests. Evidence from student narratives show that they understand what is being asked of them and that they "need to learn to think like 'the state' in order to succeed on examinations" (p. 101). They see no middle ground—they can comply and pass, or they can resist and fail. Either way, students and teachers have become alienated from the process of deep learning so that "students' identities are normalized in accordance with state-prescribed definitions of what counts as knowledge...[reinforcing] working-class norms consistent with old capitalism, undermining opportunities for students to succeed in the new economy" (p. 105).

Resistance and Agency

Gorlewski begins part II with a chapter title that captures an ethical and pedagogical complexity that likely resonates with many teachers: "Teaching or selling out." At Pontiac, teachers confront what they perceive as a dichotomy, to succumb to the instructional constraints that high stakes testing invites or teach in ways that promote critical engagement and higher-order thinking. Gorlewski explains how high stakes testing encourages teachers to maximize instructional time in ways that render the transmission of knowledge and its regurgitation efficient. This approach is described as underpinned by a structuralist epistemology. Such an epistemology, Gorlewski argues, establishes teacher superiority and undermines student agency. Gorlewski argues that failing to recognize and mitigate the pedagogical constraints invited by high stakes testing precludes efforts to challenge the reproduction of the status quo. Even though the teachers in Pontiac high school were committed to students' academic success, the school climate invited pedagogical commitments that actually competed with those commitments.

Gorlewski recognizes that multidimensional forces that shape pedagogical arrangements. In addition to implicating neoliberalism, Gorlewski dedicates chapter seven to exploring how teachers and students influence pedagogical arrangements. Teachers' perceptions of students, their own experiences with writing, and their ideas about writing across content domains are also implicated in the persistence of a structuralist epistemology. Gorlewski recognizes as well that students also played a role, as they were committed to pursuing, regurgitating, and operating within the boundaries of school-sanctioned knowledge and conventions. At Pontiac, writing as the assemblage of facts was the dominant practice. Writing was perceived as accessing and organizing information, which Gorlewski argues precluded students from using writing to discover, explore, recognize one's voice, form positive identities, and acknowledge the legitimacy of one's cultural experiences and knowledge. Gorlewski raises concern that writing instruction for working class students is part of a larger hegemonic structure that is focused on the transmission of terminology and conventions at the cost of developing critical thinking and positive identity development.

Writing instruction aimed at promoting empowerment, Gorlewski argues, requires that students' own thoughts and their own language norms are acknowledged and valued in school settings. That is, students must be attuned to what Gorlewski refers to as "inner speech" (p. 143). She states,

If students are not attuned to their own inner speech, they will be unable to inform themselves and must depend on authorities to provide the information they need. Real authorship is more than organizing information; it requires tapping into inner speech, itself a process of discovery, and engaging with content deeply (p. 143).

In addition to promoting voice and culture as the starting points for writing critically, there must be a commitment to social change and critical awareness of positionality in the world. Thought about this way, Gorlewski treats writing as a means and end of empowerment, humanity, and agency.

In chapter eight, Gorlewski discusses instances in which teachers and students demonstrated awareness of and resistance to the contradictions and asymmetries of writing instruction at Pontiac. Appropriately, the title of this chapter is "Hints of Hope, Glimmers of Resistance." Though instances of awareness and resistance were rare, Gorlewski expresses a great deal of optimism. Rooted in Freire's (1970) notion of *praxis*, which indicates a cycle of reflection and action, Gorlewski argues that awareness is key to resistance. She provides examples that depict awareness, by both teachers and students, of the contradictions and asymmetries of school policy and pedagogical practice. Another significant element in this chapter is that Gorlewski makes an alignment with some of the critical constructivists ideas of Freire (1970), Kincheloe (2005), Goodman (2008), and Duncan-Andrade (2010), to name a few. She ends the chapter with the distinction between "teaching what I know" and "teaching that I know." Of course, Gorlewski advocates that teachers and students align their perceptions of the learning process with the latter. Viewing learning as active meaning-making is an essential ingredient to empowering pedagogy.

Though not titled as such, chapter nine is about agency. Citing Lois McNay (2000), Gorlewski presents agency as "ability to act in an unexpected fashion or to institute new and unanticipated modes of behavior" (p. 198). Gorlewski favors this definition because it aligns with resistance literacy, which she understands to be a way to read, harness, and shape resistance in ways that benefit students. Being able to perform, detect, understand, interpret, and use resistance will be important objectives of both students and teachers. Gorlewski asks two key questions: (1) what opportunities do students have to exercise agency; and (2) how can educators minimize the effects of resistance, while at the same time exploiting resistance to benefit students? Gorlewski argues that some manifestations of resistance can lead to engagement with learning and critical thinking. Such disengagement she argues can be disadvantageous because it can lead to limitations of students' future choices.

In exploring these questions, Gorlewski uses the term resistance literacy. There are two possible, fundamentally related, readings of this notion. The first relates to students and teachers using writing to resist dominant power structures. This reading explicitly aligns with the Gorlewski's discussion of resistance literacy. The second relates to teachers being able to read student engagement as resistance and having the wherewithal to channel that resistance without invalidating it. For this latter reading of resistance literacy, teachers must be able to situate student engagement within a variety of political, cultural, and historical contexts and make judg-

ments about the significance and impact of such resistance. In addition, teachers also must be able to implement the appropriate pedagogy to develop, nurture, and validate that resistance while ensuring students meet important learning objectives.

Conclusion

Gorlewski navigates a difficult terrain. With the persistence of economic inequality, Gorlewski remains committed to the goal of social mobility by ensuring that students develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that can enable them to compete in a new economic arrangement. As she argues, there is a current decline in the standard of living for the working class, and one way to address these conditions is by changing how writing is taught. The challenge that Gorlewski must confront is how to address inequality without reproducing the legitimacy of neoliberalism. Similar to Delpit (1995), Gorlewski advocates a position in which it is imperative to address inequality by cultivating the kinds of human capital that are necessary to operate within a particular structural arrangement. That is, Gorlewski advocates a focus on cultivating thinking skills above transmitting knowledge in order to support competition in the “new” capitalist arrangement.

While that position makes sense, there is a concern. Those who critique neoliberalism argue that a certain kind of self is needed to be cultivated in order to support the proper functioning of neoliberal social arrangements (Apple, 2006; Fitzsimons, 2011). That self has been described as adaptive, creative, and entrepreneurial—all of which are connected to an economic logic. Remaining committed to the goal of social mobility by preparing students with adaptive thinking skills that enable them to participate in a new capitalist order potentially legitimizes neoliberalism. In addition, Fendler (2001) suggests shifting the educative focus from fixed role preparation to developing adaptive dispositions; this shift provides a new kind of flexibility suitable for modern organizational structures, relying as it does on disciplinary technologies that trouble the association between flexible and adaptive dispositions and empowerment.

Pursing mobility can also have the effect of reifying class hierarchy whereby certain economic gains and social class positions are seen as more or less valuable, as life pursuits are associated with “moving out” of or into a particular socioeconomic position. Of course, maintaining the status quo or changing it through an increased discrepancy of the distribution of wealth is equally problematic. Gorlewski recognizes these complexities and contradictions. She is nuanced in her vision of what ought to happen in terms of writing instruction and its role in addressing the social order. Aside from making the familiar strange, Gorlewski provides a key text to anchor a conversation about how to educate in ways that can address broad structural inequalities, while at the same time resist the confinement of education to economic pursuits and narrow constructions of self and personhood.

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