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DISCOURSES *and* IDENTITIES *in* CONTEXTS *of* EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

Contributions from the United States and Mexico

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Educational Progress and Social Order

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This book brings together a diverse group of collaborating authors from Mexico and the United States, predominantly from the neighboring states of California (United States) and Baja California. This creates very interesting possibilities for addressing the theme of discourses and identities within contexts of educational change within the current conjuncture, in view of such considerations as language and population demographics north of the border, immigration policies and dynamics, economic and wider cultural trends associated with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), histories of academic collaboration (not to mention history itself), and the comparatively high levels of penetration of new (and not so new) technologies and their extension into everyday popular culture on both sides of the fence. These possibilities are amplified by the book's organization around three expansive themes that tap strongly into its focus on educational change: educational practices and identities; literacy, youth cultures and virtual spaces; and educational policies and professional identities. Each theme is addressed by North American and Mexican participants, infusing multiple perspectives into the discussion. The outcome is a nicely integrated discussion of wide-ranging aspects of discourse and identity in relation to engagement in formal education and non-formal learning under contemporary conditions.

Within the chapters that follow, we encounter first-hand accounts of the experiences of Mexican adolescents engaging in "team work" at high school and using new technologies under conditions of economic scarcity; of high academic achieving students of color from low socioeconomic status back-

grounds negotiate challenges posed by the cultural and geographic distance between home and school; of indigenous educators taking up an official discourse of intercultural bilingual education within community settings in Baja California that are far removed and different from their own cultural roots and those of the indigenous groups they have been recruited to serve. We trace the steps of a Mexican academic developing a new discoursal identity—and the implications for his autobiographical identity—as the price for being accepted into membership of an elite discourse community publishing in "high impact" English language scientific journals; explore the impact of changes in California's policies on medium of instruction on opportunities for learning and potential identity construction within one teacher's fifth grade classrooms during 1993–2000; and get a perspective on the relationship between teachers' identities as members of the national teachers' union in Mexico and their identities and performances as pedagogical practitioners. And, we are presented with two complementary perspectives on relationships between discourses, identities and learning, focusing respectively on the role that knowledge-in-action plays within development of "disciplinary identities and disciplinary literacy and discourse skills," and on the potential of "game-like learning" for developing ways of reading, writing, speaking and thinking associated with deep learning.

This book could be read in many ways. My way reads it as a text that moves between forms of social research that speaks about questions of meaning, action and social order, on the one hand, and forms of educational inquiry undertaken with a view to contributing towards promoting better quality learning and more equitable academic achievement, on the other. In the final analysis, the book prompts difficult questions about the relationship between how formal learning is socially ordered and the ideal of enhancing learning on an equitable basis.

Meaning, Action and Social Order

In an interesting and useful paper concerned with developing an integrated theory of social practices, Andreas Reckwitz (2002) distinguishes within modern social theory three broad (idealized) approaches to understanding action and social order. He refers to these as purpose-oriented, norm-oriented and cultural theories, respectively.

Purpose-oriented theories explain action in terms of individual interests, purposes and intentions, and understand social order as the collective outcome of "single interests" (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 245). Norm-oriented social theories identify collective norms and values—shared rules [that] express a social "ought"—as the means for explaining human action, and *social* order is grounded in normative consensus. By contrast, cultural theories of action and

social order—of which theories of social practices are a variant—understand and explain *social* phenomena by reference to shared symbolic structures of knowledge and meaning.

Cultural theories explain and understand (social) actions "by reconstructing…symbolic structures of knowledge [that] enable and constrain [human] agents to interpret the world according to certain forms and to behave in corresponding ways" (Reckwitz, 2002, pp. 245–246). Similarly, social order is seen as embedded in a "shared knowledge"—that is, "collective cognitive and symbolic structures"—that affords a socially shared way of making sense, or ascribing meaning, to the world and doing life on this basis.

Reckwitz distinguishes social practice theory from three other lines of cultural theories, which he refers to as "culturalist mentalism," "culturalist textualism" and "culturalist intersubjectivism," respectively. Cultural mentalism is based on the idea that "mind is a substance, place, or realm that houses a particular range of activities and attributes," or symbolic mental structures (Schatzki, 1996, p. 22). Human actions are "effects" of these structures, which are *shared* cognitive possessions and, for that reason, underpin social order. Reckwitz distinguishes an "objectivist" current of mentalism, exemplified by the early structuralism of de Saussure and the later anthropological tradition derived from Lévi-Strauss, from a "subjectivist" line in social phenomenonolgy following Alfred Schütz.

Culturalist textualism locates the social, and the order(liness) of social life in the external, "public" and material realm of texts: "in chains of signs, in symbols, discourse, communication…." (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 248). Reckwitz identifies three main fronts along which cultural textualism has mainly developed during recent decades: poststructuralism and semiotics, radical hermeneutics and constructivist theory of social action (following Niklas Luhmann). In varying ways, these theoretical lines construe mental attributes as "conceptual ascriptions in discourse", and locate knowledge and the social "beyond bodily acts" (p. 249). It is paradigmatically texts to which we turn in order to source, investigate, understand and explain action—recognizable human behavior—and social order.

Taking Habermas' theory of communicative action as the classic formulation, Reckwitz argues that culturalist intersubjectivism locates the social and its orderliness within symbolic communicative interactions, where "agents endowed with minds" interact with each other. Speech acts internalize objective rules, somewhat in the manner of a linguistic twist on norm-oriented sociological theories.

In contrast to these culturalist theories of action and social order, practice theory locates shared symbolic structures of knowledge and meaning in everyday social practices and identifies practices as the smallest units of social theory. Reckwitz (2002, pp. 249–250) describes a practice as

> a routinized type of behavior [that] consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. A practice...[forms] a 'block' whose existence necessarily depends on the existence and specific interconnectedness of these elements, and which cannot be reduced to any one of these single elements...[In short, a practice is] a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood...Social practices are routines: routines of moving the body, of understanding and wanting, of using things, interconnected in a practice.

Humans are bearers or carriers of practices, through which they do and be, understand and make sense or meaning of their worlds. As carriers of practices, through participation in practices, individuals *perform* their bodies and their minds, their desires and ends, their emotions and values, and interact with things, in particular ways—thereby accomplishing identity and membership, roles and relationships, understandings and accountabilities. Practice theory, in other words, gives a particular "spin" to bodily performance, mental activities, using things (tools, technologies, artefacts), knowledge and language (oral, written, generic, discursive): a "spin" that resonates strongly with James Gee's (1997, 2001, 2007) conception of Discourses as "coordinations" as we will return to, numerous times, in the pages and chapters that follow.

Practices involve "the regular, skilful 'performance' of (human) bodies," and when we learn practices we learn to be bodies in particular ways—not just to *use* our bodies in certain ways. As the "site of the social," routinized bodily performance "give[s] the world of humans its visible orderliness" (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 251). Social practices are simultaneously patterned mental activities: "routinized ways of understanding the world, of desiring something, of knowing how to do something;" of interpreting, intending and aiming at, mobilizing emotions and desires and so on. These desires, emotions, intentions, forms of understanding and the like are not individual personal subjective states but, rather, are non-subjective, "collective" patterns integral to the practice, and that individuals take up, bear, carry and enact in recognizable ways. The "knowledge" of practice, then, is much more than propositional knowledge, including also ways of understanding, of knowing how, of wanting and feeling that are integrally connected to each other. The "things" that are taken up in practices, while "always-already interpreted" to a degree, are "things to be handled"—to be used—and "constitutive elements" of ways of doing and being: not merely things that are produced textually or in talk as meaningful—known and interpreted—entities.

For present purposes, three further points made by Reckwitz are especially germane. The first is that within practice theory language loses the predominance it assumes within textualism and intersubjectivism, while nonetheless remaining crucially important. Discursive practices, which construct the world

meaningfully in language and other sign systems, are recognized as just one among various kinds of practice. At the same time, however, discursive practices are structurally of a piece with social practices at large: comprising "bodily patterns, routinized mental activities—forms of understanding, know-how (including...grammar and pragmatic rules of use), and motivation—and objects (from sounds to computers) that are linked to each other" (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 255).

Second, practice theory takes a distinctive line on the question of human agency and "individuality." Reckwitz does not address "identity" per se, having a larger and wider interest in social theory. Practice theory situates human agency in the performance of practices: agency is exercised and expressed in and through "carrying a practice," and in doing so in ways that are recognizable but to some degree distinctive. Individuality, by contrast, consists in the unique trajectories of persons through the multitude of practices in which they engage, and their manner of engagement. This, of course, is not quite "*identity*" in the sense that has become an increasingly visible preoccupation within pockets of social, psychological and educational research in recent decades. It does, however, locate the general "space" of identity concerns within practice theory.

Finally, in practice theory, social structure and social *order*—reproduction of social structure to establish a substantive order (and orderliness) within everyday social life—are seen to consist in the repetition of routinized social practices over the sequence of time (Reckwitz (2002, p. 255). This, however, does not imply stasis. In a point that becomes especially significant in the context of contemporary educational change and policy directions. According to Reckwitz (2002, p. 255), from the standpoint of practice theory,

> the "breaking" and "shifting" of structures [takes] place in everyday crises of routines, in constellations of interpretative indeterminacy and of the inadequacy of knowledge with which the agent, carrying out a practice, is confronted in the face of a "situation."

Such "crises" might be as seemingly simple as using a tool in a different way in order to try and do something, to cashing in on "indeterminacy" within the interpretation of educational policies to develop expansive ways of assessing and reporting learning outcomes.

One further point, not discussed by Reckwitz, although crucial to the ways discussion of discourses and identities are often taken up within educational inquiry and, specifically, in this book, concerns the "two layered" meaning of "social order," namely, "orderliness" and "hierarchy." In a formulation integral to the broad theoretical frame informing this book, as we will see in greater detail below, Gee (1996, p. 132) claims that Discourses

> are intimately related to the distribution of social power and hierarchical structure in society, which is why they are always and everywhere ideological. Control over certain Discourses can lead to the acquisition of social goods (money, power, status) in a society. These Discourses empower those groups who have the least conflicts with their other Discourses...Let us call Discourses that lead to social goods in a society *dominant Discourses*, and let us refer to those groups that have the fewest conflicts... *dominant groups*.

Discourses and Identities

It is time now to focus in from this brief account of "practice theory" to the conceptual terrain of Discourses and Identities as they frame discussion in this book. While occasional references are made to norm-oriented theory of action and social order (e.g., institutionalist sociology in Chapter 7), and to culturalist textualism (e.g., Foucault in Chapter 3), the book's theoretical and methodological core lies in tenets of practice theory.

Specifically, the book draws centrally on James Gee's well-known and influential theory of D/discourse and his account of identity as an analytic lens for educational research (e.g., Gee, 1996/2007, 1997, 2001, 2004, 2008). In various places, Gee notes that his concept of Discourse (with an upper case "D") is concerned with "important aspects" of what others refer to via such other constructs as "communities of practice" (e.g., Wenger, 1998), "actor-actant networks" (e.g., Latour, 1987), "activity systems" (e.g., Engestrom,1990), "practices" (e.g., Bourdieu, 1998) and "forms of life" (Wittgenstein, 1953). These terms are not synonymous (Gee, 2004, p. 110) but rather foreground different aspects of human beings doing certain things in certain ways in order to achieve certain purposes: in the process of which they use things and symbols in certain ways and, in the doing of all this, be(come) certain kinds of persons—recognizable to others, and "interactable" with these others—within particular contexts, thereby collectively accomplishing meaningful, recognizable, enduring and orderly forms of social-cultural life.

In "Reading as Situated Practice: A Sociocognitive Perspective" (Gee, 2001, p. 721), Gee presents a set of conceptual-theoretical "tools" for understanding language and literacy in sociocultural terms: "Discourses" (and "discourses"), "social languages," "genres" and "cultural models" as follows:

> **Discourses:** [These are] ways of combining and coordinating words, deeds, thoughts, values, bodies, objects, tools, and technologies, and other people (at appropriate times and places) so as to enact and recognize specific socially situated identities and activities.

> **Social languages:** [These are] ways with words (oral and written) within Discourses that relate form and meaning so as to express specific socially situated identities and activities.

> **Genres:** [These are] combinations of ways with words (oral and written) and actions that have become more or less routine within a Discourse in order to enact and recognize specific socially situated identities and activities in relatively stable and uniform ways (and, in doing so, we humans reproduce our Discourses and institutions through history).
>
> **Cultural models:** [These are] often tacit and taken for granted schemata, storylines, theories, images, or representations (partially represented inside people's heads and partially represented within their materials and practices) that tell a group of people within a Discourse what is typical or normal from the point of view of that Discourse.

In "Reading as Situated Practice," Gee applies these tools in a highly focused manner to an instance of a distinctive kind of interaction between a child, a parent and a book. He shows how they collectively enact a "moment" of situated social practice that can be seen as "co-constructing the child as a reader (and, indeed, a person) of a particular type" (Gee, 2001, p. 723). The particular type of reader that this interaction–event–situation contributes to "shaping up"—in conjunction with many other similar and related instances—is, among other things, one that is optimally compatible with "doing well in school" and "growing up to be an educated, professional kind of person."

Briefly, and specifically, Gee demonstrates how this "moment" can be seen in terms of the participants interacting—indeed, *working* together, in a non-formal, playful, mutually engaging sense of "work"—around the book from the standpoint of a very particular and distinctive cultural model of reading that is highly efficacious for academic and school-based learning. The parent knows exactly what he is doing, and the child is in the process of "getting," increasingly, what this cultural model of reading is about and, simultaneously, "getting" proficient with the specific social language—mastery of classificatory questions—that that is part of a larger battery of social languages integral to the Discourse the three (child, parent, book) are playing out. This is the Discourse of being a particular kind of emergent reader: one that filters school reading ways into home reading ways long before the child is of school age. The process of "routinizing" the practice—in effect, of "institutionalizing" it within the home, so as to minimize the possibility of conflict between the child's primary Discourses and the Discourses that will advantageously confer social goods within the formal institution of school (and beyond)—involves repeated instances of interacting with the book in a particular way, which the actors in this case have "customized" to a small but very significant degree. In their enactment of the routine, the child uncovers a piece of a picture in an activity book, frames a classificatory question (for which the full picture, once revealed, provides the answer), and then gives the answer. These are the conceptual and analytic nuts and bolts of participation in a Discourse that is actively recruiting the child to being a particular kind of emergent reader. The child, in other words, is "taking on" the identity of be(com)ing a particular kind of

emergent reader through this situated practice. This is an identity in the sense of "being recognized as a certain 'kind of person' in a given context" (Gee, 2004, p. 99), and instantiates Gee's idea that Discourses can be seen as "identity kits."

This "moment" can be seen as one of inducting a child into a micro-element of social order: one that will likely have him recognized by other people (e.g., teachers) within other contexts (e.g., classrooms), as being the kind of person who performs in ways that are what the institution is "on about" and, to that extent, is worthy of—or merits—obtaining a greater share of social goods than those learners who cannot or otherwise do not perform in these ways.

Elsewhere, Gee argues that "being situated selves" within particular contexts—how we are recognized and responded to, how we recognize others and respond to them, how our performances within society are interpreted and acted back on by others—is complex, because "identities are tied to the workings of historical, institutional, and sociocultural forces" (Gee, 2004, p. 100). He identifies four "perspectives" on what it means to be recognized as a particular kind of person and, thereby, on how identities are "formed and sustained" (Gee, 2004, p. 100): All or some of which may apply within a given context. When the way someone is recognized and responded to is—in some degree—a function of natural forces (e.g., the person's sex, race-ethnicity, physiology, psychology, etc.), their Nature identity (N-identity) provides an "analytic focus" for understanding and explaining what is going on within that situation in terms of identity. When it is a function of someone's institutional position, their Institution-identity (I-identity) provides an analytic focus. When it is a function of other people recognizing a trait within the process of social interaction in dialogue or discourse—such as recognizing someone as a congenial or brusque individual because there are reasons for doing so—their Discourse identity (D-identity) provides an analytic focus. When it is a function of other people (insiders) recognizing someone as being a member of an affinity or affiliation, by dint of showing allegiance to, having access to, and participating in a range of practices integral to that affinity, their Affinity identity (A-identity) provides an analytic focus.

Among other things, this framework points to the kinds of "work" involved in building up and sustaining an identity. Challenging the way one is labelled institutionally (e.g., at risk learner) may involve developing certain kinds of affinities (e.g., joining an after school club devoted to literary appreciation), or working on how one talks and writes about the novelists on the syllabus list in classroom interactions and essays). It also provides a basis for examining tensions or conflicts within or between different "forces" (Gee 2004) of identification, for example, home and school identities, ethnicity and peer group aspirations, etc.

Discourses, Identities and Social Order in the Context of Educational Change

The chapters in this book collectively address an interesting range of educational change proposals and implementations, from global to local levels, and with varying points of impact within the overall educational enterprise. Some of these are state and federal level policy changes, such as shifts in the medium of instruction associated with legislation following the passing of Proposition 227 in California in 1998, successive policy proposals in Mexico designed to align it with current international policy trends, and Mexican national curriculum initiatives as implemented in Baja California that emphasize "team work" in accordance with a purported "constructivist" approach to teaching. Global level change is represented by the "obligation" on academics everywhere to pursue publication in high-profile/high-impact journals indexed to the Web of Science (and similar indices), as well as by the far-reaching changes in formal and informal learning associated with contemporary technological change. Perhaps the most local and concrete level of change represented here involves interventions to establish charter schools with specialized missions, like preparing high-achieving low-income students of color for college.

Across this span, we are presented with diverse and interesting perspectives on, and insights into, ways in which social orderliness and hierarchy are constituted and refined within everyday processes of people being recognized as being particular kinds of persons within particular contexts. The following are typical selections from the book as a whole.

Carmen Pérez-Fragoso's account of Martha's online presence and her on- and offline interactions with peers related to her multimedia production interests points to the ways participants in affinity practices establish and refine quality standards and criteria by such means as feeding back, identifying appropriate models for emulation or as reference points for developing a personal style and so on: in effect, efforts to become certain kinds of multimedia exponents manifesting certain kinds of excellence or "cool" within domains of practice where flows of recognition and kudos are manifestly not equal. Martha's interview data documents ways in which young people recognize and respond to order in the world online, identifying kindred spirits, compatible others, experts to learn from, and higher goals and levels to pursue.

From a very different perspective and orientation, Mehan et al.'s account of low socioeconomic status (SES) college-bound students at the Preuss school shows them wrestling with the conflicting demands of competing "orders"—home, school, neighborhood—that describe intersecting parameters of their cultural universes. It reports these students' growing understandings of what these competing "orders" comprise, of what it means to "belong" to them (si-

multaneously) and what is involved in trying to order them into some kind of existential and emotional coherence. The rich accounts derived from interview excerpts exemplify

> the painful conflicts associated with negotiating home and school identities. On the one hand, students' recently crystallized academic identities encourage them to venture off the traditional cultural pathways traveled by peers and family members. On the other hand, students struggled with negative reactions from family members who expected them to conform to cultural norms when considering their future opportunities. These conflicts often left students pivoting between who they were and who they have become. Making the situation more difficult for students was the time and energy they invested to succeed at Preuss, while their parents, without the requisite knowledge about the arcane college-going process, did not seem to understand their struggles (p. 39).

Karen Englander's chapter on the globalized world of English language scientific publishing speaks powerfully to the hierarchical order of "national" languages (like Spanish, English, French) and social languages within the global scientific scene. Relative to institutional policies that accept the view that being a top flight researcher presupposes publishing in English language high-impact journals, the "scientific subjectivities" of researchers and scholars like Victor rank lower than their (aspiring) English language scientific subjectivities. From the standpoint of institutionally successful careers, it is becoming increasingly less tenable for scholars to identify with non-English language-based research communities and to continue developing their academic identities, reference groups and careers within these parameters. This is partly because national research systems worldwide are moving to "merit systems" that privilege publishing in ISI—[Institute for Scientific Information] referenced publications (which are overwhelming English language). More deeply, however, it is because within many academic fields

> the theoretical and methodological perspectives provided in the core theories of [a] discipline [are] delineated mostly by theorists and researchers in the Anglo-European centers (e.g., US, UK)" (Lin, 2005, cited in Oda, 2007, p. 125). Academics, whether they are within or beyond the English-language centers, apply these "global theories" (emphasis in Oda, 2007, p. 125) to local issues and places. (See p. 216)

As Englander notes, these are the global theories that researchers apply to local places and issues regardless of whether they are in English-language centers. To be recognized as a particular kind of person—"top flight scientist/researcher"—increasingly presupposes being the kind of person who is proficient in the social languages integral to research Discourses constituted by English-language scientific communities. This bespeaks a *hegemonic* order that underpins, and is reinforced and further consolidated by, institutions worldwide buying into the ideology of "high impact, ISI-referenced, English language scientific publishing."

Guadalupe López-Bonilla's discussion of the different situated meanings evoked by "team work" for high- and low-achieving students in different school cultures provides a further illuminating perspective on the intersection of discourses, identities and social order. This focus is part of a larger research purpose concerned with the kinds of social and academic participation afforded to high- and low-academic achievers within Baja California's Technological High School and General High School cultures, respectively. The policy context surrounding the research involved the recent shift to a "constructivist" approach to teaching and learning. For many teachers, this translated into placing the main burden of learning curriculum content onto students learning through "team research and collaboration." Data analysis revealed three broad patterns among students' situated meanings for team work: the meanings made by middle class students in the elite International Baccalaureate (IB) stream of a General High school; those made by low-achieving students from the Technological and General high-school cultures; and those made by high achievers across these school cultures.

The IB students (2 percent of the school's population) regarded one another respectfully as members of an esteemed group. They valued one another's academic prowess, opinions and contributions to stimulating their individual and shared learning. For this group, team work and collaboration meant "an effortless, natural, and highly valued activity" (p. 87). By stark contrast and, seemingly, independently of social class, high academic achievers in both school cultures resented having to work in teams and rejected the identity of "collaborative team member," largely because they accepted a dichotomy between "good" and "bad" students, which rationalized perceptions that *they* were doing all the work in the teams while "bad" ("irresponsible, lazy, low" achievers) were getting a "free ride." Conversely, low academic achievers valued team work and saw it creating opportunities to enact social roles and positions (leader, expert, proactive inquirer) not otherwise open to them in class.

These are, in effect, competing Discourses of teamwork, patterned by academic achievement, social class and in the case of IB students, by the contingency of team composition. High and low achievers are differentially apprenticed to these Discourses, *ordering* their experiences and perceptions of team-based work. These differences are in turn associated with very different—*hierarchical*—learning outcomes and academic trajectories. Social order begets hierarchy here.