Student Voice: A Companion to *Democracy and Its Discontents*

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Student Voice: A Companion to *Democracy and Its Discontents* serves two primary purposes. First, as the title of the volume suggests, it serves as a companion text to *Democracy and Its Discontents: Critical Literacy across Global Contexts* (Sense Publishers, 2015). Second, the volume features critical dialogues between emerging and established scholars in the field of critical literacy education, broadly defined. It brings together a collection of essays that speak to the possibilities of taking a critical approach to language and literacy education. The contributing authors draw on their life stories and professional experiences to make a strong case for taking a critical approach to education. They demonstrate that the act of teaching always involves a grappling with the entanglement of social, cultural and political forces. In this sense, education is always a normative and ethical enterprise. The authors featured in this book will encourage readers to re-imagine critical education and its emancipatory potential in an age of neo-conservative and corporate assaults on education.

This volume, written in a lucid and accessible manner, will appeal to a broad readership interested in education. It will be an informative and engaging text in graduate and undergraduate courses on language and literacy education, teacher education, education policy studies, and curriculum studies. In-service teachers, teacher-educators, and school administrators will also find it to be a valuable resource.

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Student Voice
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A Companion to *Democracy and Its Discontents*

*Edited by*

**Karyn Cooper and Sardar M. Anwaruddin**

*OISE, University of Toronto, Canada*
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The foreword of this book, as it stands between the title page and the book proper, is just the place to consider the implications of this thoughtful book’s title. This work is a “companion” to Karyn Cooper and Robert White’s *Democracy and Its Discontents: Critical Literacy across Global Contexts*. At the same time, I’d like to suggest, it is the earlier book’s perfect complement. After all, student voices have long been endemic to democratic discontent. I say this, if I may, as one who came of age in the sixties.

Student movements were then at the center of protest and dissent, in print and on the street, in Berkeley, Paris, Toronto (in my own experience), and in many other educational centers around the world. The Students for a Democratic Society, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and the Black Panther Party (which also had its start among students) led in the organized expression of democratic discontent. It seemed part of every student’s workload during this period to join together to give voice to the sorry state of democracy on so many fronts.

They had to step out of the classroom, however, and go extra-curricular, however, to exercise the most basic of democracy’s premises: freedom of expression and association, the right to dissent. The Berkeley Free Speech Movement in 1964 had been set off by the university’s refusal to allow political protest materials – blatant acts of critical literacy – to be distributed and sold on the campus. The University of California was declaring, in effect, that direct and immediate expressions of political dissent had no place on a campus, as it was thought to disrupt, among other things, the study of such expression during the American and French Revolutions.

The university was operating as if it was only preparatory to – and not of – the world. It was well equipped to teach the young about historical foundations of this ideal political state of democracy, but did not yet know what to do with students voicing their discontent with the state of democracy. Many of those who later became the early proponents of critical literacy – among them Allan Luke, Peter McLaren, Michelle Noble, Colin Lankshear, Shirley Steinberg, Joe Kincheloe – cut their teeth on the student dissent of that era. It is what fostered their youthful reading of Angela Davis, Franz Fanon, Malcolm X, Herbert Marcuse, Paul Goodman, and Noam Chomsky, from which they moved on, as educators, to Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Ivan Illich, and others.

That decade of rising student voices, in all its democratic discontent with war, racism, and poverty, forged something of a new place for education in democracy.
Public schooling had long been held up as the flagship of democratic promise; it was celebrated as the engine of equal opportunity. The schools were to teach the young civics, equip them with a literate voice to write letters to the editor and have their say in their own governance, if only after they were done with their schooling. But the schools’ own democratic shortcomings had already become too blatant to be ignored. In the United States, the courts declared the organization of schooling undemocratic in the extreme, most notably in the United States with Brown v. Board of Education in 1954. The Supreme Court’s declaration that separate was not equal in education pointed to how the schools shaped the meaning of race in America, even as we struggle to this day to overcome the continuing segregation and inequality of schools, as well as their inadequacies in teaching about race.

Now, to be fair, not all of the discontent voiced by students represents an articulate critique of democracy’s shortcomings. Students may be acutely sensitive to the injustice, hypocrisy, bullying, and other behaviors that mar the present democracy. Yet more often in the day-to-day, class-in, class-out, flow of schooling, their discontent is muttered and conveyed in blanks stares and surly behaviors. The student malaise is more often boredom than moral outrage. It finds its voice in talking back to authority, rather speaking truth to power.

This is where critical literacy comes in. It catches the edge of this malcontent. Critical literacy may be fashioned out of that earlier student-movement sense of discontent with the democracy at hand. But it also has the ability to redirect students’ and teachers’ weary sense of school’s daily grind toward an awareness of something deeper being amiss in how this world is organized. Critical literacy also provides a means of addressing that world. This is what Karyn Cooper and Sardar M. Anwaruddin demonstrate in their assembling and editing of this book with their students, and this is what Anna Ignagni, Johana Beeharry, TL McMinn, Rosalie Griffith, Mirela Ciobanu, Zhen Qiu, Jeremy Powell, Austen Koecher, Caileigh Lyn-Piluso, and Samantha M. Leska demonstrate in voicing their engagement with Democracy and Its Discontents.

It serves us well to reflect on the extent to which student discontent constitutes democracy’s heartland and that discontent is to know no end in democracies. It is as endemic to democracy as it is to civilization more generally, as Freud had it. In light of this perpetual discontent, democracy is always, in Jacques Derrida’s conception, the “democracy to come.” That is, this present discontent always points to the need for and interest in extending the reach and extent of democracy in our lives. We are given to articulating ideals of democratic justice long before we are able to fully work out their implications for our lives and world.

This is often easier to grasp in looking back at the democratic shortcomings of an earlier era. Consider the roots of liberal democracy, as we know it. There stands the likes of John Locke, who in his 1690 book Two Treatises of Government makes a highly influential case for the desirability of government “by the consent of the people.” It is easy for us to see now that, while we still hold to this precept, his and others of his ilk held an entirely inadequate, if not morally depraved, conception
of who counted as the people. Yet the obviousness of Locke’s own compromised position on democracy, freedom, tolerance, and slavery should only encourage our own self-scrutiny. We need to grasp how the “Black Lives Matter” social media campaign suggests the democracy still to come in the United States. We need to see that, in very different ways, the Occupy Wall Street movement, Martha Nussbaum’s cosmopolitanism, and Jürgen Habermas’ critique of technocracy are all calls for a post-national democracy that is equal to the globalization of capital in advancing a more just world.

This is only to say that we are still learning about how to more fully and consistently realize long-standing democratic ideals and rights of justice of equality, consent, recognition, and deliberation. And in this critical learning process, we need to realize the necessary and vital role of discontent in the progress of democracy. We need to see that the democracy-to-come is not inevitable nor destined. It is something that we will always need to struggle for ingeniously, reiterate and reinvent relentlessly, and deliberate over without end.

This brings me back to student voice, amply represented, chapter by chapter, in this book. These students have come to terms with the need for and value of a critical, discontent-driven literacy; they speak to the healthy proximity and companionship of the title’s terms: student, voice, democracy, and discontent. The authors of these chapters are more than students, of course. And by the same token, all of us would do well to be constant students of this democracy and of the democracy that will come of our best critical and constant efforts, which is, after all, what this book and its companion represent.
INTRODUCTION

Student Voice: A Companion to “Democracy and Its Discontents”

Critical reflection on practice is a requirement of the relationship between theory and practice, otherwise theory becomes “blah, blah, blah,” and practice, pure activism.

– Paulo Freire (2000, p. 30)

Our feelings are our most genuine path to knowledge.

– Audre Lorde (2004, p. 91)

I have always loved poetry and poetic language because I feel that a few well-chosen lines can engage both the mind and the heart and, yet, I believe that this connection is often not made central in many educational texts. As such, the first quotation, listed above, said to have been said by Paulo Freire, best speaks to the main reason for writing this text, Student Voice: A Companion to Democracy and Its Discontents. But, let me explain.

In Democracy and Its Discontents: Critical Literacy across Global Contexts, my co-author, Robert White, and I created a volume that discussed critical literacy and its connection to greater democracy. To this end, we employed a framework that we have found to be quite successful in isolating various parts of the discussion for closer examination. This framework we call the “Five Contexts” (Cooper & White, 2012), and each context, while distinctly observable from one to the other, tends to overlap and exist concurrently with the other contexts that we use. These contexts are identified as the autobiographical, the historical, the political, the postmodern and the philosophical context, respectively. In addition, that previous volume featured video interviews of some of the most thoughtful scholars in the field of critical literacy. Video-clips from these interviews are framed by the five contexts. The reader, prompted by a dialogue box, may view specific video-clips at different points throughout the book.

In that first volume, we specifically discussed critical literacy and its connection to democracy in three different countries, through five separate contexts, and included video-clips from interviews with scholars in each of these locales. We began our journey in Boston, Massachusetts to interview one of the great luminaries, not only of our time, but also of all time, Dr. Noam Chomsky. Then, utilizing the five contexts, we travel variously between Australia, South Africa and North America. We end our
journey in Greece, the cradle of Western democracy, and where democracy has been assailed by the new world order of neoliberal thought.

The premise of that first volume suggests that learning to become more critically literate may assist citizens in becoming more democratic, at least in part. This is so because the notion of democracy is a function of the actions, motives and values of the people within that particular geographical and political space. We feel this notion is of particular importance for teachers, as they, perhaps more than any other group of individuals, can influence the democratic process through engaging their students in acts of critical literacy.

However, in order to better mobilize the tremendous potential of the public school system, we must first recognize structures of oppression and then seek to neutralize them. But how can this be accomplished? Returning to the quotation by Freire, we believe that theory must always be connected to practice. This second volume responds to this call.

The second quotation by Audre Lorde, also quoted above, frames this call to action. Often when engaging with teachers and graduate students in critical literacy, it has been my experience that the real struggle becomes how to connect critical theory to practice. When my graduate student, Sardar Anwaruddin, and I used Democracy and its Discontents: Critical Literacy across Global Contexts to frame this discussion in a recent critical literacy class, somewhat predictably, many of the participants had difficulty connecting theory to practice in their professional lives. Believing very deeply the words of Audre Lorde, that feelings are our most genuine path to knowledge, I asked the graduate students to produce work that speaks to their own interests and heartfelt feelings. Some of the best results of their work are featured in this companion volume. In creating these two volumes, it is hoped that the theory/practice and mind/heart connections are addressed in a more embodied way.

In Chapter One, Anna Ignagni, unpacks ways in which the literacy discourses in her family have shaped her identity. Anna makes use of some of the interviews found in Volume One and incorporates the work of Hilary Janks to examine how her father’s literacy discourse interrupts the literate versus illiterate binary that positions the “non-literate” as powerless. In addition to this, Anna calls upon her two sisters to describe the literacy practices within their childhood home. In this heartfelt paper, she also comments on the contexts of historical, social, economic and political literacy factors that affect identity within cultural boundaries.

Chapter Two features Johana Beeharry, who, through an annotated bibliography of Barbara Comber’s work in critical literacy, explores the possibility of “doing” critical literacy with Early Years students. Comber’s work takes a critical lens to teaching practices, particularly in terms of teacher expectations, assessment, privileging of skills and abilities, gender, and the socio-cultural backgrounds of children. Developing this annotated bibliography allows Johana to recognize her own personal biases and to interrogate institutionalized prejudices and, thus, to continue to make positive changes in her own classroom practice.
TL McMinn, in Chapter Three, reveals the possibilities for critical identity literacies regarding Queer youth’s use of the Internet and online communities in order to rehearse or “practice” identities. By creating and manipulating these practice identities, Queer individuals may use their “difference” as positions of power instead of weakness. This allows one to write one’s own story and provide themselves the opportunity to embrace or discard stereotypes and/or labels they may have inherited.

Hilary Janks is featured in eight video-texts in Volume One and, in Chapter Four of this text, Rosalie Griffith incorporates the five contexts framework to compare Janks’s Apartheid South Africa and its intersections with modern-day Toronto schooling for Black Students. This creative work underscores the importance of understanding literacy and its relationship to power not just in local contexts but also around the world.

In Chapter Five, Mirela Ciobanu draws upon the foundational ideas of Allan Luke and Hilary Janks in discussing why critical literacy is needed now more than ever in schools, particularly in mathematics classrooms. Mathematics wields considerable power, as it continues to be regarded as a subject of utmost importance for students. As such, it holds a special, privileged place among other disciplines and continues to be lauded for its claims of objectivity and neutrality. Ciobanu deconstructs this perspective on mathematics education.

Zhen Qui uses her own autobiography in Chapter Six to make a tentative inquiry into how English, as the language of power, has influenced English teaching and learning in Chinese schools. She then makes suggestions as to what English teachers can do to encourage critical literacy in their classrooms in China.

In the next chapter, Chapter Seven, Jeremy Powell examines four videos from Democracy and Its Discontents, featuring recorded interviews with Professor John Willinsky. In these video interviews, Professor Willinsky cites a number of philosophers to develop his ideas. Jeremy then returns to the original works of many philosophers that Professor Willinsky identifies in order to reveal new understandings and possibilities for practice.

Austen Koecher presents an annotated bibliography of Hilary Janks’s work in Chapter Eight. Austen analyzes how Professor Janks’s writing not only promotes social justice and equity through critical literacy but also how it can be applied to contexts outside of South Africa.

In Chapter Nine, Caileigh Lyn-Piluso presents an analysis of the Grade Ten “critical literacy” curriculum in Ontario, Canada. She discovers that critical literacy is presented in such a way that it has little potential to help facilitate the development of students’ critical consciousness and projects of critical analysis. After this curricular deconstruction, she presents a critical literacy project incorporating meaningful ways to engage students in critical activities.

Samantha M. Leska, in Chapter Ten, critiques a newly designed curriculum unit from New Haven, Connecticut. She suggests how it can be altered to better emphasize truly critical practices. Through this process, she invokes teachers to
reimagine how they may adapt their own curricular materials to engage students in critical literacy, and hopefully in developing a more democratic society.

The epilogue is written by Dr. Robert White. In this final word, Dr. White moves through a succession of themes relating to critical literacy, as brought forward by the students who have made this volume a reality. This “afterword” highlights some of the comparisons and contradictions uncovered through the thoughtful pages of this book.

This practical text may be used in concert with the previous volume, *Democracy and Its Discontents*. However, this book may also be used on its own, as a perspective into the real lives and workings of real people. After all, it is the feelings that generate the “most genuine path to knowledge” and it is our feelings that guide us in our journey to understand others’ feelings, values and circumstances that speak to us from the past, through the voices of our students, the wave of the future.

REFERENCES


ANNA IGNAGNI

1. CRITICAL LITERACY

One Family at a Time

INTRODUCTION

At moments in my life, I am reminded of my family’s literacy practices. Literacy was central to our interactions with my father, as he pressured my sisters and me to be readers and placed high value upon the ability to critically analyze political situations in countries far beyond the scope of my experience and understanding. My father took up the role of critical literacy teacher in our home. Through a deluge of newspaper clippings, we were taught to “read the word and the world” (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 135) according to my father’s interpretation of freedom, justice, equality and power.

When I read Turning to Literacy by Hilary Janks (2010), during my first week of a Critical Literacy course at OISE, I was instantly reminded of my family’s literacy stories. Janks examines an advertisement for Standard Bank under which the caption reads, “At my age most people forget how to count… To us he may look 73 years old, but inside he’s more like a six year old with a whole new world to discover” (p. 8). Janks argues that the advertisement “infantilizes one of the learners in the programme within a deficit construction of illiteracy” (p. 9). Upon reading Janks’ critique of the advertisement, I was struck with two thoughts: first, my grandmother, who was illiterate, had never been infantilized within my family’s discourse; in fact, she had been celebrated for her financial literacy, tenacity, hard work and beauty. My second thought questioned the literacy practices that my father dictated within our own home and how negative discourses contradicted his celebration of my grandmothers’ power.

In this essay, I will use the work of Hilary Janks to examine how my father’s literacy discourse interrupts the literate versus the illiterate binary that positions the illiterate as powerless. My analysis is based on two interviews conducted with my father on May 27 and 31, 2014, in which we discussed the social, historical, economic and political factors that affected my grandmother’s illiteracy. During the interview, my father honoured my grandmother’s strength of character and power. He suggested that financial literacies, health and medical literacies, and the oral literacy practices within her rural Italian community empowered my grandmother. He further suggested that reading and writing were not valued within this historical, economic and social context.
In addition to this, I will examine my father’s lack of access to formal education and describe his drive to overcome these barriers in order to develop his own literacy. Finally, I will call upon my two sisters to describe the literacy practices within our childhood home, for, if “identity is shaped in part by the way literacy is used” (Cooper, 2005, p. 42), then my task in this essay is to unpack how the literacy discourses in my family have shaped my identity.

Hilary Janks (2010) questions, “How much literacy makes one literate? How many communities of practice do we need to belong to in order to do literacy across a broad range of practices?” (p. 2). My father pays tribute to his mother’s strengths and, in particular, highlights her financial literacy. He explains that my grandmother had very strong numeracy and could easily manage both the local currency and government bonds. He states:

Bonds she could read those very well. I still have some bonds from 17 years ago...She could read them anyway. And, she could recognize them because they were different colours. If it was 100 lires, it was green. If it was 1000 lires, it was red. They were different colours and she knew them very well. And, she could add very well. She could add better than me. (Interview with Arduino Ignagni, May 27, 2014)

This passage illustrates that my grandmother possessed some forms of literacy. Her ability to recognize numbers and to do calculations opened the possibility of purchasing government bonds and accumulating and maintaining investments. In addition, her financial literacy allowed her to engage in commerce. My father states:

She sold some crops. She sold poplar trees to make paper, which now is out. Nobody wants to buy them anymore, but those days you could sell them. She did very well with that. There was a paper factory in the town that employed one thousand people. Then the [government] bought it and closed it down, and the paper then came from Brazil. (Interview with Arduino Ignagni, May 27, 2014)

He describes her business transactions with a large company despite her illiteracy and illustrates how she was financially stable or “could do well.”

My father further explains that my grandmother’s position as widow offered income from her husband’s pensions, which she used to provide a home for her family. “With the pension she had, with the war pension, veteran pension and with the work, she built the house we had, a house that was almost one of the best at that time, in the 1950s, not really grand but more than an ordinary house” (Interview with Arduino Ignagni, May 27, 2014). These excerpts depict a financially astute businesswoman. During the second interview on May 31, 2014, he reiterates, “when my mother died, she had three pensions. She had her own. She had a veteran pension and she had the one from his work. So, she had three. [The pension was from] my father’s work, so she was very well off. She was a lady in the end. She was a lady, you know” (Interview with Arduino Ignagni, May 31, 2014). Feeling that this claim
that my grandmother was a lady, despite her illiteracy was important to my father, I asked for clarification as to what constituted the title “lady.” He replied, “The money. She had the money from the pension and plus she had a nice house. It was one of the best houses in the area there” (Interview with Arduino Ignagni, May 31, 2014). In my father’s opinion, since my grandmother had access to land, housing and money, her illiteracy did not negatively affect her. When I visited my grandmother in Italy, she did not seem powerless. I viewed her as a powerful, resourceful and independent woman who lived a comfortable life.

If we overlay Bourdieu’s description of forms of capital over my father’s story, we can see my grandmother’s struggle with the forces working within and upon her field. Bourdieu suggests that:

\[
\text{[t]he ‘winners’ in this struggle are those who possess the requisite resources or ‘capitals’ deemed of most value within respective fields…The capitals that come to characterize a field are the product of a process of accumulation of particular traits, behaviours, properties, titles, academic qualifications, indeed any entity characteristic of the social world…} \quad \text{(Cited in Hardy, 2010, p. 73)}
\]

Given my grandmother’s lack of access to literacy, she engaged in a struggle to acquire financial security and a home. Having accumulated these capitals, my father has given her a title in order to describe her new position within her social world or field. My father has devalued literacy through his repeated claim that reading and writing were unnecessary skills and, furthermore, is not critical of his mother’s lack of access to literacy. According to Janks, “…literacy is just one among many social goods that are distributed. Where we sit in the social hierarchy also affects our ability to access resources such as housing, land, healthcare, clean water, food and transport” (Janks, 2010, p. 5). It is interesting that my father has given value to financial security and housing rather than literacy.

I wonder if his own story is at play here. Like his mother, he did not have access to schooling and focused his work on the goal of achieving financial stability. A contradiction occurs in that he worked doggedly to develop his own literacy.

In addition to financial literacy, my grandmother took up many roles through her work and life on the farm. Through her five marriages, she became the mother of three stepchildren and the birthmother of two more. After the death of her first husband, my grandmother married my grandfather who was a widower with three children. Following these marriages, my grandmother had three more common-law husbands who she outlived. Given her large family, my grandmother performed many tasks beyond the scope of farming, all of which required literacy. My father claims that, due to the lack of access to doctors and hospitals, medical literacies were necessary on the farm and in her role as mother of five children. He states:

You didn’t need the school for this time in any country. You needed to work and you needed to be healthy. If you were on the farm and you collapsed, there was no doctor to look after you. They take you to the hospital and a week later,
you are either back on the farm or in the cemetery. There were two places. If
you broke your arm, you needed to know how to fix it yourself…if a tooth
was sore, you had to pull it out. You didn’t go to the dentist [laughs] you got
a strong thread and you pull your tooth out. (Interview with Arduino Ignagni,
May 27, 2014)

Moreover, during the World Wars and Great Depression, there was little assistance
from the Italian government and the Italian economy was depressed. My father’s
interview reveals the intense poverty that his family endured and overcame through
their resourcefulness and effort. His discourse suggests that the literacies of survival
were the key to their preservation.

My father describes the role of the church as contributing to the oral literacy
of my grandmother. According to Janks (2010), “…literacy has been defined as a
social practice. The notion of literacy practice implies patterned and conventional
ways of using written language that are defined by a culture and regulated by social
institutions” (p. 2). The church played a central role in my grandmother’s life and
the life of her community, as it was a source of news for the citizens. There was little
need to read, as the priest communicated most news. My father describes the literacy
practices of his family:

They had books, but you get the news through the church. If a person had
died, they would ring slowly with the bell. If a person got married, they
would have a sound…If they had a certain church service, they had a way
to ring the bell and you know. And, when you go to church on Sunday, if
there was any news, the priest would tell. The priest would tell if you lost a
wallet or if they had found a ring or something like that. Everything would
come through the priest’s mouth. That is the only news you would get during
those days. Newspapers. You couldn’t afford to buy newspapers. You know,
newspapers were expensive. And, plus, there was no reason, no time to read
them. I remember when the war started in France, the bells were ringing and
the soldiers were marching. (Interview with Arduino Ignagni, May 27, 2014)

Deborah Brandt (1998), in Sponsors of Literacy, suggests that “agents, local
or distant, concrete or abstract…enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit,
regulate, suppress or withhold literacy – and gain advantage by it in some way”
(p. 166). My father’s description demonstrates how the church, as a sponsor,
regulated the kind of news that the citizens received, from current events to deciding
which familial celebrations were to be publicized to the community. Given that
many people did not have access to literacy education, the church could orally
provide information about the community and global affairs. Through this role of
sponsor, the church ensured regular church attendance and the illiterate citizens were
given access to the knowledges that were selected and provided by the priest. My
father is not critical of the church’s role as a sponsor of literacy. Brandt suggests
that “…sponsors deliver the ideological freight that must be borne for access to
what they have…the sponsored can be oblivious to or innovate with this ideological burden” (Brandt, 1998, p. 168). In contrast to my father’s description of the various ideological slants of the newspapers, he does not question the power of the church and chooses to highlight the importance of membership in this sphere of literacy.

My father compares my grandmother’s literacy to the others in her community. He acknowledges that literacy is classed. He states, “That was the life in any country in any society, except for the rich. The rich were another thing.” (Interview with Arduino Ignagni, May 27, 2014) Luke and Freebody, in Constructing Critical Literacies, pose the questions, “Are they less powerful because they are less literate or less literate because they are less powerful…? What is clear here is that who gets to be a reader is not simply a matter of pedagogical efficacy – it depends in large part on patterns of the distribution of power and knowledge in a society” (Luke & Freebody, 2011, p. 200). My father suggests that all subsistence farmers worldwide, regardless of race, lacked access to literacy opportunities. He does not name the literacy practices of the upper class except to articulate the difference.
By comparing my grandmother to others in her community, he sees her accomplishments rather than her lack of opportunity. Heath suggests that “…it is not possible to separate literacy from questions of power… the binary literacy/illiteracy offers only negative subject positions for people who are not literate” (cited in Luke & Freebody, 2011, p. 5). She further suggests that the middle class literacies are valued over those of working class. In choosing not to discuss the hierarchical nature of literacy, perhaps my father seeks to tell a story about his mother within her field as a subsistence farmer and not in relation to the upper class literacies that were inaccessible. Perhaps he chose to disregard the greater social structure of literacy in order to maintain the story of her power.

NONNA IOLANDA: ILLITERATE AND POWERFUL

Hilary Janks’s article compelled me to question if my grandmother attempted to hide her illiteracy. Janks shares the story of Lily-Rose, a student at the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa, who wrote personal literacy accounts in order to consider what it feels like to be literate. Janks examines an excerpt of Lily-Rose’s literacy history that tells the story of her amusement when she observed a man on a bus who attempted to disguise his illiteracy (Janks, 2010, p. 6).

Figure 1.2.
When questioned about whether my grandmother disguised her literacy deficits, my father responded:

No, she never hid what she didn’t know because, like I said, before Napoleon’s time, they all knew how to read and write because they lived in towns, walled towns, but after they spread out to the country, they lost the idea to learn, the interest to learn. The only thing they had to do was [subsistence] work. About half of the people in the community couldn’t read or write and it was part of life. (Interview with Arduino Ignagni, May 31, 2014)

My grandmother lived in a community of subsistence farmers who managed farms and raised crops and animals, leaving little time for middle class literacies. My father’s use of the words “idea” to learn or “interest” in learning is puzzling. In fact, he seems to suggest there was so much work in their lives that literacy was not a priority. When asked about what literacies might have been important during his mother’s life, he replied, “None, you had to work. You had to have muscle. That’s all you needed those days…It was not important in those days to know how to read and write” (Interview with Arduino Ignagni, May 27, 2014). During the second interview, my father reiterated, “[My mother] didn’t have time for school, because school was not necessary. You had to work. You had to look good so you could get married at sixteen. You had to be healthy” (Interview with Arduino Ignagni, May 31, 2014).

This insistence that reading and writing during those days was not important began to raise questions. My maternal grandmother wrote beautifully and it was a source of great celebration when her letters would arrive. Moreover, in my childhood home, my father valued the ability to read and write. Given this contradiction, I began to analyze what my father had to say about his own literacy as a means of better understanding his identity.

ARDUINO IGNAGNI: FIGHTING FOR LITERACY

Throughout the interview, my father’s literacy discourse presents many contradictions. As he speaks his mother into existence, he celebrates her success in the farming business, and he praises her ability to achieve financial stability and provide a home for her family. My father’s story writes his mother into existence as the female hero who gained power through the literacies that she possessed, despite her inability to read and write the traditional texts that were valued by the middle and upper classes. Yet, a repeated contradiction appears throughout the data. For my father, an important goal was the acquisition of the traditional middle class literacies that he dismissed as unimportant in his mother’s life. He speaks of being denied access to an education due to the historical context of his upbringing, describes the effort he put forth to become literate, laments the job that he was forced to accept due to his literacy deficits and criticizes his work colleagues for their lack of literacy. In an effort to “take apart the
endless layers that are seen to constitute [my father’s] social reality” (Given, 2008, p. 8), his own literacy practices and attitudes will be examined.

Early in the interview, my father explains that, given his father’s career, he was entitled to enter a college. He states, “[We] could go to the college without paying;” however, World War II interrupted his schooling. He explains:

We had to stop for the war in 1942…41 – 1941 – and then there were too many cars. The Germans were moved down the peninsula and we had to cross a main road, which was Number Two Highway for the Roman standard and it was too dangerous, so we had to quit school around May 1943. I was in grade two. For two years, there was no school because there was no government in the Casino area; Casinato, they called it. So, I could go to college for free, but the president of the school didn’t accept me because I had to be eleven, but I was thirteen. He said, “I cannot put a thirteen year old boy with eleven year old boys.” So, I was out of that. I couldn’t go. I went and finished my public school and that was it, and then I went to work. (Interview with Arduino Ignagni, May 31, 2014)

My father explains that, due to the war, he was denied access to formal education. First, the schools were closed due to the war and then he was too old to enter the first year of college. With his literacy possibilities closed off, he went to work. Unlike his mother, however, he struggled to further develop traditional middle class literacy skills.

My father is a reader. He devours newspapers; sometimes several a day. He did not have any friends to my knowledge, either at work or in his personal life. When he wasn’t working, his time was spent reading or watching the news. Since he seemed to dismiss the need for literacy during my grandmother’s life, and I knew this to contradict his own practice, I prompted him with a comment about his love of newspapers. He responded:

… And, I loved [reading] then, too. The Bible was…the great-great-grandfather must have had a Bible with a leather cover, so I loved to read. I read about Joseph and his seven brothers. I read about almost everything anyway what the bible said… I read Il Messagero. I liked Il Messagero. It was sort of a liberal newspaper and the Unity was communist and I never liked it. Avanti was socialist and I never liked it because it was too much, too many radical ideas. The best was Il Messagero because it was a liberal paper and they told common stuff. (Interview with Arduino Ignagni, May 31, 2014)

His description includes his analysis of the newspapers available to him and their political slants. His analysis seems to suggest that he tried on ideologies through his reading of the papers. He settles on the liberal newspaper and its “common” ideas. This decision is consistent with his desire to work within the systems available to continue to become educated and to gain the capital of literacy within his field.

My father further explains that purchasing these newspapers required sacrifice, and he used his limited resources to gain access to the practice of reading. He states:
When I had money I bought [newspapers] on a Sunday or Wednesday. There was all sorts of advertising and I bought it. It was expensive, the newspapers in those days. You couldn’t afford much of anything. Maybe I could if I didn’t care about piling up money to buy a house or to buy whatever. I used to buy comics, because, at that time, there was no television; so, I had to buy comic books. I used to buy comics but, after, I used to sell them to another kid who would give me a little bit of what I had bought if for. I would buy used ones. [In what year would you buy newspapers?] I came here in 1954; so, between 1950 and 1954, that’s the time when I grew up. I was fifteen to eighteen, thirteen; let’s say ‘48 when I finished my school to ’54 when I came here. (Interview with Arduino Ignagni, May 31, 2014)

These literacy practices took place during his teenage years. Other boys his age might have been in high school or working, but it is interesting that work alone was insufficient, and he was struggling to build his knowledge through nontraditional means.

Another contradiction lies in my father’s analysis of class and literacy. When describing his mother’s literacy, he suggested that she had no use for literacy due to her class. I asked my father, “How did race, class and gender affect your literacy?” Interestingly, he articulates that his literacy affected his access to jobs and limited him to manual labour. In this case, he suggests that this level of literacy hindered him. He, like his mother, possessed strong financial literacy skills but complains about the “mud” that he endured during his career in the water works. He claims that his work was a means to allow his daughters access to education and a better life. Once again, he is not accepting literacy as static but, rather, is using literacy to gain capital and transcend class. He states:

Well, I could have had a good job. I had to work in the water works, work in the mud, for so many years, but I did it. I did what I wanted to do. I bought more than one house. I wanted to send you to the school, even if you didn’t learn good enough, that’s your problem, but you had a chance to learn. If you had five years in Kingston there, not in jail, in the university, you came out what you are. And, so it was for Sandra, you know. (Interview with Arduino Ignagni, May 31, 2014)

Perhaps, my grandmother’s illiteracy prevented her from advocating for her son’s education, or my father’s focus on education was due to the barriers he faced as a young boy after the war. He suggests that my identity was shaped by my time at Queen’s University. He claims, “…You came out what you are.” Again, this is a contradiction to his description of his mother. My grandmother gained power as an illiterate woman through her labour and the literacies that she possessed. In contrast, my father claims that my sister and I were shaped by our time at university and presumably the middle class literacies that we gained there.
During the interview, my father is critical of his colleagues who did not take up the literacies that were offered to them. He explains that “some people, I worked with, some people here, they couldn’t read the cheque and they were Canadians…I had to read how much money they got, and if you asked them, one country, maybe Chile, at that time it was Allende, they didn’t know what Chile was and what did they care?” (Interview with Arduino Ignagni, May 31, 2014). Perhaps it was a source of pride that he knew more than these men who were given the opportunity to be educated. His story further demonstrates the value he placed on being able to read, know the world and understand the political tides of the times.

DEMANDING LITERACY: THE LITERACY PRACTICES IN OUR HOME

Most paradoxical to my grandmother’s story were the literacy practices in my childhood home. My father was determined to teach us critical literacy. According to Luke and Freebody,

…In an era of postcolonialism and global capitalism, marginalized, minority, and indigenous communities have an urgent stake in the nature and efficacy of literacy education efforts, and, importantly, in the dominant theories and methodologies used to legitimate these efforts…and to what end they can influence the development of literate citizens and workers. (Luke & Freebody, 2011, p. 192)

In our home, my father became the critical reading teacher in an effort to influence and shape our literacy and knowledges of the world. “Education opens doors” was a mantra in our home. We were told that education was the key to transcending our working class position. His “social purpose” for critical reading was to make us upwardly mobile in addition to raising awareness about social justice and political issues.

I have included the voices of my sisters in this article because, even as an adult, I still feel that my father’s efforts to teach us to read the word and the world were detrimental to me as a daughter, student and teacher (Freire, 1970). During my childhood, my sisters were more able to read and write to my father’s standards, and their recall of facts and cognitive processing speeds were exceptional. My father was very critical of my literacy deficits. Although I am thankful that he taught us to see the world from a variety of perspectives and to be wary of “propaganda,” I am certain that my closeness to and rejection of my father’s severe and relentless push to make us literate affected my reading and analysis of the data. In the excerpts below, my sisters share the literacy stories of our home.

SANDRA IGNAGNI (FROM EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE ON JUNE 10, 2014)

What were the literacy practices in your childhood home?

• Having newspaper articles slipped under bedroom door upon waking
• Reading newspaper articles aloud at breakfast
• Being evaluated for clarity of reading voice (e.g., # of words stumbled over)
• For the most part, the public library provided childcare and therefore I had access to books
• Quiet reading time at home a rarity, however
• Watching the morning news over and over and over - developed political awareness through sheer repetition
• Knowledge of current events tended to undermine literacy because it meant I did not have to read anything in order to excel academically in elementary, high school and even university
• Quality of handwriting evaluated for clarity
• Wrote letters and other correspondences on behalf of parents
• Dad brought home a book of political cartoons (Ben Wicks), which I read several times and used it to learn about Canada’s past historical leaders and key political events (esp. Trudeau/Clark years + OPEC oil shocks)
• I read books given to me by my sisters (Bruno and Boots, Adrian Mole, etc.)
• When bored (no TV + few friends) I read my sister’s university textbooks

How did these attitudes towards literacy shape your student identity?

• Confidence re: Canada’s political history
• Hate, hate, hate being asked evaluative type questions by teachers/others in positions of authority
• Horrible anxiety with presentations
• High level of writing confidence and I’m not sure where this came from

ESTHER IGNAGNI (FROM EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE ON JUNE 10, 2014)

Obviously, I think our home placed a very high value on literacy – although this was not always conveyed in an inspiring or encouraging way.

Let me start with mum – who I think gets short-changed in our family discussions about scholarly life. I have such a strong image of her preparing ‘tickets’ on Thursday evenings. I was impressed by the number of sheets and the colours – little girl stuff. I remember asking her why the tickets were in different colours and she indicated that some workers couldn’t read. I also remember her pride in the fact that her mother and grandmother could read – and as such could write letters. I sense those letters were everything to her – I have vivid images of her sense of satisfaction when she came home to a letter from Italy, and the rituals of writing a letter ‘back home.’ I was also impressed by the complexity of her literacy – she often negotiated the prices per ‘piece’ in the factory, since she and the union steward had the best math skills – or numeracy. This has likely enabled her to find dignified, decent work in the wake of the transformation of the Canadian fashion industry. I’m now thinking about how she worked with patterns – a material/technical literacy of sorts. I suppose I’m now also thinking about her considerable everyday literacy – reading labels, recipes, toy instructions, craft books, etc.
As my eyesight changed throughout my childhood, mom also was instrumental in getting me through exams. I remember, one year, her reading my biology text aloud so that I could study for the exam. I did well – despite the fact that some of the work was meaningless to her.

I don’t know if you both remember when she went to union school and she began reading Hemmingway. That was very funny – and she was desperate to do well. I don’t know how much of her work I proofread. At the time, I thought this was opening up new horizons for her – but I don’t think I had an appreciation of her considerable scholarly knowledge.

I’m also wondering about her own academic history prior to coming to Canada. My sense is that she was good in school, but was not allowed to continue because she was a woman.

I start with these memories because I think they were obscured by the patriarchal presence of Dad. Not to say that Dad didn’t have lots to do with influencing our literacy – it was far more overt and forceful. On its own, his insistence on reading the paper, looking up words in the dictionary, forcing us to write official letters, making us read his old Italian schoolbooks (and then translate into English) – could have backfired dramatically. That said, I think there were things he did that promoted a love of reading that was much more generative. I loved the “Readers’ Digest” magazines he brought home. He filled the house with books from garage sales, the garbage and hand-offs to supplement his handyman wages. I particularly loved a very old (circa 1950s) children’s encyclopedia he brought home. I could look at that for hours. He brought home Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Anne Rice. He brought us to the library every Saturday and this was likely our salvation.

My sisters are highly literate. Both have earned doctorate degrees. They have been the honoured recipients of Governor General awards, a SSHRC and numerous scholarships. More importantly, they are kind, curious, tenacious and positive contributors to their communities. Perhaps one could suggest that the literacy practices in our home shaped, rather forcefully, our identities as learners.

By examining my father’s construction of my grandmother’s illiteracy and contrasting that assignment to his own literacy practices and the practices of my childhood home, I have begun to construct my personal literacy story. As a child, my father felt powerless and chose to celebrate certain literacies that his mother possessed. In his own life, he fought against the assignments of “uneducated” due to his lack of access to formal schooling. When given power within his own home, he took up the role of critical literacy teacher in order to empower his daughters. This examination of our literacy story has raised my awareness of my own identity, allowed me to examine my family’s constructions of literacy, offered an opportunity to reflect upon the literacy practices in my childhood home, and broadened my definition of literacy. I no longer consider my grandmother illiterate but, rather, acknowledge the many forms of literacy that she possessed. This story, however, is incomplete. I would like to further examine the silences in the data regarding my grandmother’s relationship with my father. My father did not refer to
my grandmother as loving, kind or caring. Despite prompting, why was my father focused on material success rather than my grandmother’s personality? With these questions and a deeper understanding of my identity, I hope, through the process of writing this article, I have become more critically literate.

REFERENCES


