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Conceiving Change: Models, Methods, and Literate Practices

THIS BOOK is about change. More specifically, it is about how literate practices can foster change, from self-revisions to collective social movements.¹ To understand this process, I study three different cases, two historical and one contemporary. Through these cases, I investigate how varied groups use literate practices to mobilize collective endeavors. In each, people draw on literate practices to define group goals, to catalyze support for those goals, and to design and implement strategies for pursuing them.

Two ethnographic chapters examine *Struggle*, a community literacy program that supports urban teens and parents. In *Struggle*, participants reflect on, articulate, and revise their life goals and plans for pursuing those goals. In the process, they strengthen key relationships and support systems. Two historical chapters analyze full-fledged social movements. One chapter discusses two radical religious and political movements of England's Civil Wars. The second explores the Pittsburgh region's 1930s unionizing movement. Each of these cases illuminates the way literate practices can foster social change in particular cultural, political, and economic circumstances.

I chose these disparate cases to examine how literate practices operate in different contexts. Three kinds of differences make these cases especially useful: differing emphases on individual versus group change as the focus for improving society, differing emphases on secular versus spiritual or religious grounds for change, and differing emphases on internal cohesion via cultural similarity versus greater political power via cultural diversity and numbers. These differences shape change efforts with a range of grounds, means, and ends. Thus charting the similarities and differences in the role literate practices

play in each case provides two benefits. The cases' diversity gives commonalities greater significance than would more similar cases. This diversity also promotes understanding of how different contexts foster different roles for literate practices and produce differences in each group's size and efficacy. Those differences promote understanding of when, how, and to what ends literate practices can most effectively support change. Certainly, other cases could offer comparable diversity. But these three combined that diversity with particular relevance to my research context.

I first approached questions of personal and social change through an interest in Renaissance England's literature and culture, focusing on the period's widening material and cultural gap between rich and poor, its intensification of poverty, and its shift of power from local venues to the central government. Critical theory, from Foucault and Althusser to Spivak and Derrida, offered a way to use these historical events to better understand current relations of economic, cultural, and political power. I have been influenced by Foucault's understanding of discourses and power relations, Althusser's conception of ideology, Spivak's readings of Foucault and Marx, and Derrida's argument about how language inevitably differs from both referent and reception.² Despite their substantial differences, these arguments provided ways to understand and address a social system that promotes inequities and exploitation.

This interest prompted my turn toward composition and rhetoric. As I studied these subjects, I recognized that freshman composition exemplifies Foucault's arguments about how institutions and disciplinary practices help construct people's identities (or subject positions). I saw the link I had been seeking: the way to use critical theory not only to understand past instances of social change but also to promote current changes, both individual and collective. In developing my interest in collective change into a research project, I realized the importance of working not only with historical instances but also with a current empirical example. I was directed toward Pittsburgh's Community Literacy Center (CLC), cofounded by Linda Flower, who generously encouraged me to participate in and observe CLC programs so I could study how personal and social changes unfolded and what role literate practices played in those changes.

I began participating and observing at the CLC in early 1994, first informally and later as part of the staff. Initially, I took part in Inform, a program in which teens from city high schools worked with university mentors to produce documents and community conversations on issues central to their lives. They discussed such concerns as school policies on suspension, risk and respect, sexuality, gang violence, and teen-police relations.³ From there, I

moved to Hands-On Productions, a similar program in which teens and mentors wrote, acted, and produced videos on similar issues. In 1995, several CLC staff members invited me to join them in developing a new project. Struggle was designed to support adults and teens in renewing both their individual goals and their shared relationships; it involved adult-teen pairs rather than university mentors. I worked with Struggle until I left Pittsburgh in mid-1998.

I collected ethnographic data at various points in my participation at the CLC, but I eventually decided to focus my research on Struggle, not only because of its relevance to my interests but also because the collaboration and negotiation in the Struggle planning group offered as rich a data source as did our work with program participants. I audiotaped both our planning meetings and those Struggle sessions I facilitated. I also collected relevant documents, from the texts Struggle participants produced, program training materials, and brochures to our planning notes, grant proposals, and academic papers on Struggle. I took field notes not only on Struggle sessions and planning meetings but also on meetings with funding-agency representatives, public presentations of Struggle, and social gatherings attended by Struggle's planners and sometimes by participants (e.g., church services, baby showers, etc.). Further, I interviewed Struggle participants a year after they had completed the project, and I audiotaped these interviews. I transcribed audiotapes of both the interviews and Struggle sessions and planning meetings. The two ethnographic chapters are based in my field notes, transcripts, and collected documents. In selecting materials to use in both the ethnographic and historical chapters, I have been careful to include data that challenge the theory I used to interpret the book's three cases. I incorporate such negative cases into each chapter's analysis and into the larger argument made in chapter 7.

While working in Struggle, I drew on my earlier interest in Renaissance literature to learn about the context of two radical religious and political groups during England's Civil Wars. These groups, the Levellers and Diggers, emerged from the era's ferment of Protestant sects and used newly recognized interpretive freedom to construct scripturally based arguments for political and economic equality. I decided to focus on the Diggers' texts because they (unlike the Levellers) sought economic as well as political equality and actually formed small communities that temporarily pursued the way of life they advocated.

Near that time, I encountered the University of Pittsburgh's Beaver Valley Labor History Society (BVLHS) archives, a collection of materials related to the steel unionizing movement in western Pennsylvania. After surveying its range of union newspapers, pamphlets, posters, oral history project interviews, and similar materials, I focused on the *Union Press*, a local union newspaper first published in Aliquippa in the 1930s. I chose this journal because I was

interested in Aliquippa residents' drive to seize civic control of their company town from the firm that dominated all aspects of local government from the town's founding in 1906 until November 1937. Chapter 6 depicts residents' successful use of literate practices to accomplish that redistribution of civic authority. In addition to examining the *Union Press*, it also draws on BVLHS transcripts of interviews conducted with union members as part of an oral history project, as well as on published sources.

During this process, I continued participating at the CLC, and that experience intensified my concerns about critical theory. I grew more aware of its seeming distance from concrete projects of social change, projects linking academics with critical theory's constituents. I heard occasional hallway references to Foucault's work with prisoners, Spivak's work with impoverished third-world women, and Derrida's involvement with marginalized groups, but I never saw such work discussed substantively in academic texts or other formal venues. And I saw little critical theory on how to promote change, work with concrete examples of collective grassroots projects, or support resistance to power. Instead, among readers I knew, critical theory seemed to encourage the presumption that change efforts are inevitably co-opted, blindly complicit, or eventually defeated. My Struggle participation underscored these concerns by highlighting the need for a sense of hope and agency often felt by critical theory's constituents.

I also began to encounter a range of literacy theory and research that offered different approaches to understanding change. For instance, work by Goody and Watt and by Ong provided heady, all-encompassing visions of how literacy transforms cognition. Later work by Heath, Ogbu, and Scribner and Cole produced more concrete evidence and nuanced arguments about how specific literate practices encourage particular kinds of cognition rather than transforming cognitive styles holistically. Ethnographic research on specific communities' literate practices by researchers such as Cushman (*The Struggle and the Tools*), Dyson, Farr, Lytle, and Purcell-Gates persuaded me both that such work does have broader implications and that each community's use of literate practices differs and must be studied in its own terms. Critiques by Berlin, Gee, Graff, and Resnick and Resnick echoed critical theorists' suspicion of institutions by demonstrating the historical function of schooling to socialize an underclass of low-wage workers. Yet their historically framed arguments also suggested that different contexts and social relations could use literacy instruction toward other ends. I encountered this suggestion explicitly in theories of community literacy developed from the CLC's own programs in pieces by Flower and by Peck, Flower, and Higgins.

Erickson's, Street's, and Szwed's arguments for pursuing ethnographies of

education affirm that such research as the study of *Struggle* can contribute to more nuanced understandings of the various roles literate practices can play and the personal and social effects they can foster. Historical works by Burton, Gere, Miller, Royster, and others illustrate the perspective that can be gained by analyzing earlier examples of literate practices. They suggest that historical studies afford long-term perspectives and examples of other kinds of social relations, thus providing another key approach to studying literate practices. Like critical theory, such studies offer pictures of alternative social arrangements.

As I considered such work in relation to critical theory, I began to hear each kind of approach—empirical and theoretical—as amplifying different aspects of literate practices. Critical work emphasized alternate possibilities and illustrated how current conditions are shaped by larger practices and discourses with long, influential histories. It foregrounded the large-scale structures that shape identities and social practices. Empirical studies of current conditions seemed less able to grasp these structures. For instance, Heath, whose admirable work with Trackton’s literate practices inspired me, also provided a caution by failing to see how her construction of her white working-class Roadville subjects played into discourses stereotyping working-class people (see Gorzelsky, “Letter”). Further, in their emphasis on what is, empirical studies often ignore what might be, the possibilities for bettering people’s lives.⁴ Yet my reading of empirical studies persuaded me that theoretical works often miss processes and the possibilities for intervening in them. They ignore how the complexities of individuals’ felt experience (re)produce social reality. In revealing foundational structures, they miss the processes that shape those structures. In contrast, empirical studies miss the structures but reveal these processes.

Given my belief that language inevitably erases aspects of reality, I thought that even a synthesis of historical, critical, and empirical work couldn’t provide positive knowledge. But my work in *Struggle* and my reading in literacy studies persuaded me that each approach contributed a partial knowledge. I concluded that a synthesis of the three can document both the structures and processes of social reality. It can present both existing and alternative social relations to consider how literate practices work to support change in varying contexts.

While reading work on literacy, I also encountered critical and experimental ethnography. I was strongly influenced by arguments such as Tyler’s for composing ethnographies that foreground subjects’ voices in dialogue with the ethnographer’s to decrease the colonizing tendencies of traditional ethnography. Seeing this kind of work taken up by such researchers as those published

in Mortensen and Kirsch's collection on qualitative studies of literacy, I decided to construct such dialogue in my text. My early drafts included more sections in my Struggle colleagues' voices. In asking them to respond to my depictions and to contribute their own, however, I came to feel I was imposing on their time and good will. Further, readers found some sections difficult to digest and tangential. Therefore, I balanced dialogue with cogency by including just two short excerpts composed by my Struggle colleagues.

Other work on critical ethnography influenced me as well, for example, Marcus and Fischer's call to situate ethnographic studies in the context of global political and economic relations, Clifford's emphasis on paying attention to the allegories undergirding our ethnographies, and Tyler's argument that ethnography can't directly represent reality but can—and should—evoke the possibility of a more equitable, just community. Unlike Willis, I don't systematically interpret my ethnographic subjects' relation to the larger economic or political systems.⁵ But I consider how local uses of ideology, discourse, and change connect to both existing power relations and the question of systemic revision. Unlike Tyler, I believe ethnography can represent a partial—if always limited—depiction of reality. Still, I agree that part of its potential power (as in Mead's classic study of Samoa) is in evoking the possibility of more just and humane social relations.⁶ I try to evoke such possibility in three ways: by combining my ethnographic representations with depictions of historical alternatives, by foregrounding the metaphors Struggle's participants and planners used to pursue change, and by emphasizing narrative, plot, characterization, and dialogue as well as description and analysis.

Further, following much critical ethnography, I include reflexive sections that depict my own changes. I do so both to provide another kind of data on change and to contribute to the book's underlying allegory of growth. Despite the dangers of presuming that change is organic or positive, I believe the allegory of growth through engagement with difference has powerful potential to encourage more peaceful, equitable social relations. Thus, like other recent ethnographers in composition and rhetoric (e.g., Cintron, Lindquist, and Schaafsma), I use explicitly rhetorical and literary strategies to make my text's form part of its argument and to accent my research subjects' voices. Still, cautioned by Newkirk's argument that qualitative researchers must eschew unrealistic success stories, I include failures, disconnections, and missed opportunities. In addressing both obstruction and growth, I try to ground a realistic hope.

Meanwhile, I discovered Gestalt theory through two friends who were doing postgraduate work at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland. Because it

emphasizes the importance of experiential (or phenomenological) knowledge, Gestalt helped address my concerns about critical theory's tendency to foster disconnection and pessimism by stressing the gulf between language and lived reality. Gestalt shifted my focus from language structures to the mesh between language use and experience. In the words of its foundational text, it helped me to see how literate practices emerge not strictly through language structures or content (such as discourses or ideologies) but through "habits of syntax and style" (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman 321). Reading my ethnographic and historical data through Gestalt theory led me to see individual and social change not as struggles with ideology, uncritical thinking, discursive rules, or language structures but as problems of connecting language use with experience to revise awareness and perception. In the process, I've come to see this connection as central to change.

Working with Gestalt theory also helped define my stance on what kind of knowledge we can achieve and how. I still credit Foucault's argument in "Truth and Power" that disciplinary methods of constructing knowledge are closely tied to consolidating power. I also agree with Derrida that language cannot represent reality without distortion. I believe both are right about the power of discourses to shape what we say beyond our intentions or capacity to control the effects and implications of our words. I think Spivak, in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and Althusser (despite their substantial differences) are right about the power of ideology to shape perception and experience. Yet unlike many readers of such work, I do not therefore conclude that representation has no connection with reality. While I agree that knowledge is partial, I believe we can use it to make our actions more effective and ethical, if never completely so.

Empirical, theoretical, and experiential approaches each produce such partial, provisional knowledge. Integrating the three is not like assembling puzzle pieces: it cannot produce a whole picture that offers us positive knowledge in the traditional sense. Still, by including multiple voices, it produces a richer representation with more—and more varied—ties to reality. While that reality is perhaps never fully knowable, we can achieve provisional, nongeneralizable knowledge to use in approaching new situations. For instance, as I argue in chapter 7, I do not believe we can produce a definitive, generalizable model of how literate practices support change because the process differs in each situation. But by examining patterns and differences in various cases, I construct a heuristic, a tool for analyzing how literate practices operate—and could be revised or extended—in a given context.