

REFRAMING  
SOCIOCULTURAL RESEARCH  
ON LITERACY

Identity, Agency, and Power

CYNTHIA LEWIS  
*University of Minnesota*

PATRICIA ENCISO  
*The Ohio State University*

ELIZABETH BIRR MOJE  
*University of Michigan*



2007

LAWRENCE ERLBAUM ASSOCIATES, PUBLISHERS  
Mahwah, New Jersey

London

## Examining Opportunities to Learn Literacy: The Role of Critical Sociocultural Literacy Research

Elizabeth Birr Moje  
*University of Michigan*

Cynthia Lewis  
*University of Minnesota, Twin Cities*

In this era of accountability for learning outcomes in literacy education, it might be easy to ask whether sociocultural and critical perspectives on literacy learning and practice still matter. We know that sociocultural and critical perspectives have moved education research to new and different research questions over the last 10 years; but are these questions still relevant? Do they make a difference when we think about the need to demonstrate children's and youth's learning on standardized assessments? Do they answer the difficult questions of education when we recognize that schools and districts are scrambling just to make "adequate yearly progress" and to demonstrate that they have what it takes to educate children?

As we argued in the introduction, we believe that they do matter now more than ever, but we also believe that it is incumbent on critical sociocultural literacy researchers to be clear about how these perspectives matter, how they can be integrated in ways that demonstrate rigorous science, and how taking such perspectives seriously can improve opportunities for all people to learn. That is, although we applaud the attention being given to children's and youth's literacy learning, we argue that greater attention

must be given to the role of power in their opportunities to learn. In this chapter, we illustrate, through the analysis of one small bit of classroom transcript, that critical sociocultural perspectives may be the only available tools for demonstrating how children's opportunities to learn are both supported and constrained by the role of power in everyday interactions of students and teachers and by the systems and structures that shape the institution of schooling. Before turning to this illustrative analysis, however, we begin with a theoretical discussion of some central constructs in our work: learning, identity, agency, and power.

### THE ROLE OF IDENTITY, AGENCY, AND POWER IN LEARNING

As education scholars, we are ultimately interested in learning, whether in formal or informal contexts and spaces. But what is learning and how do our various analyses help us think about learning? How are identity, agency, and power aspects of learning?

Learning, we argue, both involves and requires participation in something. Learning is motivated, as Kress (2003) argued, by a need to understand something, whether an act, a word, a sensory experience. Learning, however, also leaves a residue; it makes a mark on the participant. In that sense, learning draws from and constitutes "histories of participation" (Rogers, 2002) in other spaces, at other times, and with other people. Indeed, what makes learning so complex—and more than just participation—is that people bring their histories of participation to bear on each new act or moment of participating. Thus, learning can be conceived of as always being situated in participation, but not necessarily synonymous with or reduced to participation. Learning goes beyond the moment of participation to constitute a history and to shape a future act of participating.

Learning is a moment of participation within something, but within what? Is it within a social context? Is it within a group, an epoch, a space? For us, the best way to think about learning is to situate it or embed it within all of the aforementioned items by using the phrase *discourse communities*. Discourse communities are groupings of people—not only face-to-face or actual in-the-moment groupings, but also ideational groupings across time and space—that share ways of knowing, thinking, believing, acting, and communicating, or, in Gee's (1996) parlance, "Discourses."

The curious paradox of learning is that it simultaneously occurs in and is necessary for access to discourse communities. Lave and Wenger (1991) addressed this contradiction by arguing that learners move from legitimate peripheral participation to expertise or central participation as they learn, and that in most communities of practice, learning is constituted by this movement. However, what Lave and Wenger were less explicit about is the

idea that learning provides access to and control of Discourses—or ways of knowing, thinking, believing, acting, and communicating—that may be used to control the activity and material goods within a community. Moreover, because material resources are always limited, discourse communities produce and struggle over cultural tools, resources, and identities (both within and across communities) that provide them access to Discourses and thus, to the material goods. Some participants in discourse communities may have better access to or control of tools, resources, and identities necessary for full participation and control of Discourses and material goods. This access or control is not only an artifact of expertise (newcomer versus oldtimer), but also of qualities of difference such as race, gender, sexual orientation, or economic status, depending on what aspects of difference matter most or are most marginalized in a given discourse community.

If one accepts that learning is always situated within discourse communities or is about gaining access to communities, as well as that discourse communities struggle over access to resources and that people within discourses communities are not always viewed or treated equally, one must then acknowledge that learning is shaped by and mired in power relations. In addition, in a globalized, increasingly diverse world, people move across discourse communities, seeking to gain entrance, while existing members may be seeking to retain control over the community or to retain the community's power and access to resources, vis-à-vis other competing communities. Thus, gaining access to a community's discourses—learning across discourse communities—is also a power-imbued process.

### The Role of Power in Opportunities to Learn

Power is a complicated and challenging construct, precisely because the working of power in people's learning lives is often neglected or is relegated to a position of outside agent acting on the subject. We argue, by contrast, that power is produced and enacted in and through discourses, relationships, activities, spaces, and times by people as they compete for access to and control of resources, tools, identities. Our thinking about power depends heavily on Foucault's (1980, 1984) theorizing about power as "productive," a result of interactions and relationships, rather than an entity that is possessed by some and desired or resisted by others. Some groups are dominant over others, but this dominance is sustained through "processes of different origin and scattered location" (Foucault, 1977, p. 138) that regulate minute details of space, time, and bodies, thus producing and normalizing bodies to enact prevailing relations of dominance and subordination (cf. Bordo, 1993).

In arguing that power is produced in and circulates among people, Foucault did not deny that regimes or systems of power exist. Instead, his argument suggests that it is through micropractices of power that systems and

regimes are produced and reproduced. In other words, we can participate in creating differentially valued subject positions, even when attempting to challenge or subvert oppressive power relations. For us, it is an explicit analysis of these unpredictable productions of power, as well as the systemic workings of power, that is often missing from sociocultural perspectives on the learning of literate practice.

Working from these perspectives on power, it follows that learning is more than a matter of accumulating, assimilating, and accommodating knowledge in structures coordinated by the brain. But those words, accumulating, assimilating, accommodating, are not made irrelevant by the acknowledgment that learning is a social process. There is, after all, the question of what learning is, beyond the matter of where, when, and how learning occurs. What does it mean to have learned something? How does one know when one, or another, has learned? How do those histories of participation that are constituted in learning get formed and transported from one discourse community to another?

Drawing from Piaget (1977)—who hovered over the last few sentences—we argue that learning might be about accumulating, assimilating, and accommodating information, ideas, and concepts. But learning is also more than those things; learning is also the acquisition or appropriation of ideas (Vygotsky, 1978, 1934/1986), and, further, we argue, learning is resistance to or reconceptualization of skills and knowledge. This acquisition, appropriation, resistance to, and reconceptualization of skills and knowledge is a process that may involve taking up and taking on existing discourses or disrupting and transforming fixed discourses (Lewis & Ketter, 2004). And the acts of taking up, disrupting, and transforming discourses have implications for how one conceptualizes the constructs of identity and agency.

### **The Role of Identity and Agency in Opportunities to Learn**

Learning, when conceptualized as all of these possibilities, has the potential to make and remake selves, identities, and relationships. In fact, learning both promotes and constrains agency by providing or constraining access to discourses. What, then, makes something an act of agency? Agency might be thought of as the strategic making and remaking of selves, identities, activities, relationships, cultural tools and resources, and histories, as embedded within relations of power. At times, but not always, the relations of power themselves are disrupted and remade.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Butler (1993), in fact, argues that agency occurs primarily through radical resignifications rather than through disruptions of overt power hierarchies.

Lave (1996) and Gee (2001) have argued that learning can be conceptualized as shifts in identity; that is, one learns to take on new identities along with new forms of knowledge and participation. Deep, participatory learning involves learning not only the stuff of a discipline—science content, for example—but also how to think and act something like a scientist, even if one does not enter the profession of science. For example, recently, Elizabeth's 8-year-old daughter, Avery, was presenting Elizabeth with a lecture on weather, and on tornados, in particular. In the process of her lecture, she mentioned that a tornado is only a tornado if it has touched the ground; until then, it is merely a funnel cloud. Elizabeth mentioned that it was funny that people talked about seeing tornados, not seeing funnel clouds. Avery replied, "Well, probably most people call them tornados even when they are really only funnel clouds. But scientists, when they're talking to each other on their microphones, will say 'funnel cloud,' unless the funnel cloud has touched the ground." What's noteworthy in Avery's discourse is not only her specific use of terminology, but also her distinction between "most people" and "scientists" and her idea that the scientists would be "talking to each other on their microphones," an idea she gleaned from watching videos of meteorologists communicating across weather stations as part of her science unit. Thus, Avery was not only learning conceptual distinctions, but she was demonstrating an awareness of a particular kind of science practice and discourse, and distinguishing it from that of the everyday person.

A few days later, when driving with a friend during stormy weather, the topic of tornados came up again. Avery's friend commented that perhaps they would see a tornado, and Elizabeth said, "Will you see a tornado, or just a funnel cloud," at which Avery smiled and winked, suggesting that Avery saw the language distinction as insider knowledge. This example is not meant to suggest that Avery has become a scientist, but that observing the practices of scientists and recognizing them as different from other practices was an important aspect of her learning and her identity development as a science kind of person (or not). Avery was not, in fact, enacting a scientist identity, as illustrated by her discourse, in which she refers to scientists as "they." However, this awareness of discursive practices as distinct across communities is a key ingredient to the ability to strategically enact an identity of her choosing.

Learning thus involves both awareness of differences and distinctions, and, ultimately, an act of subject formation, that is, identification with particular communities. These identifications can be demonstrated through the enactment of particular identities one knows will be recognized as valuable in particular spaces and relationships (see Orellana, this volume). That is, as people acquire, appropriate, resist, or reconceptualize skills and knowledge within and across discourse communities, they continue to be formed as acting subjects.

Equally important—or perhaps more important—is the idea that as people move across different discourse communities, they enact identities that will be recognized in particular ways by those communities (see Gee, 2001/2001 on identity as recognized). Eight-year-old Avery, for example, would not be recognized as a scientist by practicing scientists at the University of Michigan regardless of the fluency of her discourse. Other features of a person—age, ethnicity and race, gender, and social class, to name a few, shape how people are recognized. And those recognitions shape how people see themselves. Thus, learning shapes subject formation, which shapes identity enactments that allow for different types of agency. But the power of that agency still depends on recognitions, which draw heavily from physical and social features of the person and the discourse community the person is trying to enter.

However, the process of people navigating across discourse communities also has the potential to change the discourse communities themselves. Learning is thus not only participation in discourse communities, but is also the process by which people become members of discourse communities, resist membership in such communities, are marginalized from discourse communities (or marginalize others), reshape discourse communities, or make new ones. Such membership shapes opportunities to learn, and, ultimately, learning.

If literacy researchers and theorists could agree that identity, agency, and power are important constructs in learning literacy (a hotly contested assumption), then it could be argued that having a real opportunity to learn requires several conditions related to these constructs. First, it requires that one's subjectivity and the identities one enacts be recognized and accepted as valid and worthwhile, even when they may conflict with those subjectivities and identities typically built in the learning space. Opportunity to learn also requires that participants have the space and support for agentic action, that is, that learners have opportunities to make and remake themselves, their identities, their discursive toolkits, and their relationships on the basis of the new ideas, practices, or discourses learned through their participation in a learning activity.

Given these points about opportunity to learn, it is worth asking whether we, as literacy researchers, have attended explicitly to such constructs in what is typically thought of as sociocultural literacy research and whether we have done enough to make explicit how identity, agency, and power matter in people's opportunities to learn literacy. We are not the first to ask this question and to argue for more attention to relations of power in sociocultural work (cf. Gutiérrez & Larson, 1994). We want to build on this call for more attention to issues of power and on the exhortation to better analyze the relationships between the global and the local (Brandt & Clinton, 2002) in sociocultural work. Our analysis of the literature sug-

gests that, if examined, these constructs are examined in many different ways, and methods are not always clarified or documented for readers. Our intent in this chapter is to bring together three perspectives that allow the sociocultural researcher to analyze explicitly power, identity, and agency and their implications for opportunities to learn at both local and global levels.

More important, in a time period dominated by attempts to bring instructional interventions to scale, researchers who study the role of power, identity, and agency in children's and youths' opportunities to learn must be diligent in producing scientifically rigorous and trustworthy analyses of the processes at work as they learn inside instructional interventions. We argue, therefore, that we must name constructs carefully, and we must use the best research practices at our disposal to produce such analyses. Our intent in this chapter is to bring together three perspectives that we believe allow us to do just that. We suggest that these three approaches, when used in concert, support researchers of all backgrounds in analyzing the implications of power, identity, and agency for people's opportunities to learn across many different discourse communities.

### CRITICAL SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY: METHODS OF ANALYSIS

In this section, we present a brief discussion of three complementary analytic methods that together are informed by critical sociocultural theory. None of these methods, we argue, would be sufficient on its own for uncovering the opportunities and constraints for both student and teacher learning. These perspectives include activity theory, cultural studies, and critical discourse theories. We have chosen to highlight activity theory as a form of sociocultural theory because it is often used in sociocultural studies and because we find it to be a powerful framework that helps to shed light on how activity contexts mediate people's teaching and learning. We highlight critical discourse theories because they offer theoretical and methodological tools useful to understanding how discourse both shapes and is shaped by social processes and institutions. Closely examining this dialectic process as it relates to learning and schools reveals, among other things, the role of power and ideology in people's learning lives. We layer critical discourse theories with a cultural studies perspective because cultural studies demand that researchers spend time understanding cultural practices of different groups, examine those practices from the perspectives of the individuals engaging in them, and recognize that power is produced in people's everyday lives and instantiated in institutions, systems, and socioeconomic structures that shape, and, at times, control people's everyday lives. As such,

power can work in unpredictable ways, thus making space for individuals to act with agency even in seemingly oppressive conditions.

### Activity Theory: A Synopsis

For most activity theorists, the key to understanding an activity is in the study of its goals or "objects" (Engestrom, 1999; Leont'ev, 1977/1978). The goals of an activity may be utilitarian, functional, or material in orientation (e.g., to finish reading a piece of literature, to meet a content standard, or keep students under control), or they may be ideational (e.g., to examine beliefs and values, to enjoy a piece of literature, to learn to write in a particular form). Goals may be a combination of functional and ideational: A teacher and her students may wish to meet a content standard of learning to write a thesis statement; the teacher may organize the activity in a way that keeps students in their seats and "under control," or she may organize the activity in a way that encourages students to interact across the room in small group discussions. In general, most classroom activity goals are complex in orientation, working across function, ideas, and material conditions. Although most activity theories argue for need as central to goal-settings, many early activity theorists neglected the role of desire, as Ingalls (2005) argued, in relationship to need, goal, and object. Davydov (1997), however, emphasized desire as key to understanding the content of activity goals. In fact, his final stage of analysis requires that the analyst examine participants' awareness of each others' desires and needs in the enactment of an activity.

In addition, situating any given activity within a mediating activity system is a central aspect of the work of activity theorists. But activity systems are not benign or neutral. They serve a normative function that determines the parameters of the activity. These two points—participants' awareness of other participants' desires and needs and the role of activity systems in mediating activity—point to possibilities for examining the role of power at microlevels and macrolevels. Activity theory, as traditionally conceived (e.g. Engestrom, 1999; Leont'ev, 1977/1978), however, does not explicitly acknowledge such issues of power (see Gutiérrez & Larson, 1994, for a deeper analysis of that point). Consequently, we turn to critical discourse analysis to assist us in analyzing the role of power in learning activity.

### Critical Discourse Analysis: A Synopsis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is both a theory and a method that examines how social and power relations, identities, and knowledge are constructed through written and spoken texts in social settings such as schools, families, and communities. Specifically, it involves an analysis of "how mem-

bers of social communities produce their 'orderly' or 'accountable' worlds" and then, in a departure from other kinds of discourse analysis, extends the analysis to how "members' practices are shaped in ways of which they are usually unaware by social structures, relations of power, and the nature of the social practice in which they are engaged in whose stakes always go beyond producing meanings" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 72). The power of CDA is in its methodological precision, which enables the analyst to illustrate how power and Discourse are produced in day-to-day discourse, and, further, how these productions reflect and instantiate systems, structures, and institutions of power. In fact, we assert that activity theory alone does not possess the tools for a macrostructural analysis of the role of these different players and their goals in the activity system that shapes the classroom. Activity theory analyses typically neglect the analysis of the systemic structures in mediating activity within a given setting, and, perhaps more important, do not provide the methodological tools for analyzing how these systemic structures enter a localized activity and begin to speak through the discourse of the participants. Discourse analysis can help to tease out how these different systems work together by examining how the cultural models and Discourses that operate in different activity systems get brought into a given activity through language and other means of representation.

The methodological precision of CDA allows for an analysis that articulates the relationship between microlevel activity and macrolevel social structures. CDA examines genres (ways of acting), discourses (ways of representing), and styles (ways of being) as they work in relation to one another to produce orders of discourse (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 1992, 2003) that instantiate powerful social orders. These semiotic components are more directly available for analysis than the social orders they instantiate, thus allowing analysts to examine power relations as they are produced.

### Cultural Studies: A Synopsis

Cultural studies as a theoretical frame is notable for its attention to a dialectic relationship between micropractices of everyday life and macroprocesses of structures, systems, and institutions. A hallmark of work that operates from a cultural studies perspective is that it views power in more fluid and unpredictable ways than other critical perspectives. Thus, although cultural studies attend to systems, institutions, and structures that shape people's access and opportunity in everyday life, a cultural studies perspective assumes neither that people who are marginalized are automatically duped or powerless, nor that power flows only in hierarchical and linear directions from macrostructures to micropractices (see, e.g., the work of Moje, 2000; Radway, 1984; Willis, 1977). Another notable aspect of cultural studies is its

attention to how the mass media, popular cultural texts, information technologies, and other popular forms of representation function in people's everyday lives to serve both as forms of expression and pleasure and as systems of domination and control (Fiske, 1994). Finally, cultural studies as a theory is particularly attentive to the relationship between subjectivities and enactments of identities. The cultural studies theorist examines, in particular, the agency of actors to enact powerful identities within culture and structural relations, at times challenging oppressive regimes, at times only tweaking them, and at times reproducing them.

Bringing activity theory, cultural studies, and critical discourse analysis together shifts analyses from specifying only how people's goals, desires, and needs shape an activity's production toward an emphasis on how people produce and resist the power of others' desires as they engage in particular activities, situated within the particular activities and activity systems an activity theorist might analyze. In Table 2.1, we offer a chart of analytic questions a researcher might ask from these different perspectives. In the column on the left side of the chart, we draw from activity theorists to pose questions typically asked in activity theory analyses. On the right side of the chart, we draw from discourse theorists and cultural studies scholars to offer questions that one might pose from a combined "critical cultural" discourse analysis.

## ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

Our goal is to show in an analysis of one brief snippet of classroom discourse how we combine these sets of questions to produce a more powerful theoretical and analytical lens than any one of the three theoretical perspectives can offer alone. Our overall purpose in the analysis is to ask what people learned in this activity and what were their opportunities to learn or to teach. Given our theoretical stance that learning is shaped by identity, power, and agency, we asked specific questions about those opportunities to learn:

1. How are students' experiences and subjectivities<sup>2</sup> incorporated into or shut out of the learning activity?
2. How are their different identities recognized by other participants in the activity?
3. What cultural models or ways of knowing (Gee, 1996) are invoked in the activity and how do these models and Discourses frame identities and opportunities for agency?
4. What are the moments for agency—that is, strategic making and remaking of self and sometimes the material conditions surrounding the self—afforded in this exchange?

TABLE 2.1  
Guiding Questions for Conducting Critical Sociocultural Analyses

<i>Activity Theory Analysis</i>	<i>Critical Cultural Discourse Analysis</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the activity being studied?</li> <li>• What are the tools used in the activity?</li> <li>• What are the objects or goals of the activity?</li> <li>• Who are the participants? (Who are the subjects of the activity?)</li> <li>• What are the needs, desires, or motives of the various participants?</li> <li>• What is the activity <i>system</i>?</li> <li>• Who are the participants of the system?</li> <li>• What are the goals of the system?</li> <li>• In this activity, who acts/talks? When? How?</li> <li>• What is the content of their utterances, and how is that content shaped by the activity? The relationships? The tools? The system?</li> <li>• How does the content of actions/utterances vary across participants?</li> <li>• What are the structures of the utterances?</li> <li>• How are those structures shaped by activity, relationships, tools, the system?</li> <li>• How does the structure of actions/utterances vary across participants?</li> <li>• What do people learn in this activity?</li> <li>• How do identities get constructed, shifted, contested, and/or changed?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are some of the features of this social activity?</li> <li>• What discourses (or ideologies) surface in this discussion?</li> <li>• What social identities are enacted in this exchange (through language use, linguistic constructions, discourses, generic features, actions)?</li> <li>• What identities are enacted in this exchange (in action, talk, and silences)? What is the nature of the identities?</li> <li>• What relations of power are enacted and/or produced in this exchange? How are these power relations locally produced? How are these power relations tied to and reproductive of larger systems of power?</li> <li>• What aspects of the action, talk, and silence could be considered agentic? How? Why?</li> <li>• What is made and remade in this exchange? How, if at all, does the making and remaking destabilize local and global power relations?</li> <li>• What tools are being used to engage in these agentic practices? How are these tools both local and global? How are they embedded in power relations? How, if at all, does the use of these tools destabilize power relations?</li> <li>• What relations of power are enacted and/or produced in this exchange? How are these power relations locally produced? How are these power relations tied to and reproductive of larger systems of power? How, if at all, does the making and remaking destabilize local and global power relations?</li> <li>• What is being learned via these practices?</li> <li>• How do identities get constructed, shifted, contested, and/or changed?</li> </ul>



Although we have posed research questions, we do not intend this analysis of one brief instance of classroom interaction to serve as a research report. This analysis serves only as an exemplar of how these methods could be applied to analyze opportunities to learn with an eye toward identities, agency, and power. To make strong claims about what the participants of this activity learned, we would need to present more data from across the full time frame of the study. The analysis, then, serves as a "telling case" (Ellen, 1984) that reveals otherwise invisible or obscured identity enactments, moments of agency, and cultural models and Discourses that may shape participants' opportunities to learn. It should be noted, however, that this analysis is framed by a much larger study, and indeed, draws on data collected over time and multiple participants. Thus, although not a research report, this telling case is a valid analysis of the opportunities to learn in this space, as documented in other analyses (see, e.g., Moje & Ciechanowski, 2002; Moje et al., 2004).

In this chapter, we often pair the terms *cultural models* and *Discourses* because we find them inseparable despite their slightly different meanings. As Gee (1999) explained, cultural models mediate between an event (microlevel) and its operating Discourses. For example, in the following exemplar, readers will note that the Discourse of "good gangs" is mediated by cultural models of "family" and "friendship." To represent the close relationship between cultural models and Discourses as illustrated by this example, we refer to them together rather than teasing them apart.

## ANALYTIC METHODS

Although we do not intend this chapter to serve as a research report, it is, nonetheless, important that we describe in some depth our methods of analysis. To initiate the analysis, we began by reading, commenting on, and coding the transcript utterance by utterance, with an utterance defined in this case as every turn of speech, even if one person's turn interrupts another. That is, even when one individual continued a statement that was interrupted by a second speaker, we counted the first speaker's statement as consisting of two utterances.

Once we had read, coded, and commented on the transcript, we set out to define or identify the activity itself. We defined the activity in terms of the actions observed and the goals, motives, needs, and desires of the participants engaged in those actions. Because this is a school classroom—a clause that hints at the importance of understanding how activities are situated within activity systems—the initial object of the activity is determined by the teacher. Whether that object is taken up by students is always an open question. A challenge for the activity theorist studying classrooms is deter-

mining whether the object of any given activity is understood or shared by all participants. Similarly, an additional challenge is entailed in sorting out relationships across multiple activity systems that come together to serve as a mediating system, or network of systems, for the activity under study.

Studying activity systems evokes the notion of cultural models and Discourses for us. Thus, as we moved through the transcript, utterance by utterance, we asked questions about the Discourses that seem to surface in the discourse of the text. However, simply naming Discourses is not enough in CDA; the analyst must then document how those Discourses are called into presence or instantiated in the discourse (actual talk) via language and other tools. Consequently, a discourse analyst works through a text, utterance by utterance, line by line, sentence by sentence, depending on the particular analyst's stance. We opted to move through utterance by utterance, as we did in the activity theory analysis, but in this iteration, we focused on the linguistic construction of particular statements (sometimes sentences, other times clauses).

We employed a hybrid of Gee's (1999) discourse analytic perspective, Fairclough's (1992, 1995) perspective, and our own practices (Lewis, 2001) to analyze the linguistic constructions. We started with Gee's global analysis (Gee, 1999, pp. 85–86 and 93–94), which requires asking questions about how (a) semiotics (or sign systems) are established, (b) how worlds are built, (c) how activities get constructed, (d) how identities are made available or recognized, and (e) how political alliances and connections across people, spaces, times, and concepts are built. The next move is to engage in grammatical or linguistic analyses that focus on function and content words, salience of information, stress and intonation, and groupings of ideas or concepts. Gee recommended breaking transcripts into different formats, such as line or stanza, to establish the flow of ideas and examine the macrostructures and microstructures of the talk as a way of examining how identities get positioned, activities constructed, and worlds built. We, however, maintained our focus on each utterance as a way of retaining the flow of the activity, and, particularly, participants' turn-taking, which we saw as an important element of the activity.

Next, we employed Fairclough's (1992) analytic tools for examining discursive practice. We analyzed the talk in terms of turn-taking, exchange structures, topic control, setting and policing agendas, formulations (foregrounding and backgrounding of different ideas, perspectives, terms), modalities (how present individuals made themselves or others in their language), politeness, and ethos (embodied and spatial relations). To Fairclough's analytic tools we also brought Gee's ideas of examining closely how language choices positioned participants and others, focusing on the types of verbs used, the participants included and excluded, and how participants are named. We examined grammatical relations of subject and



object. We examined how information was foregrounded and asserted in people's talk and what information was backgrounded and assumed. And we thought through the cohesive devices used in the talk, how different words, gestures, and ideas linked other words and ideas together.

Throughout these analyses, we used Gee's method of rephrasing statements to examine how the meanings and Discourses evident in particular constructions would change if we changed the linguistic construction. We then reread the entire linguistic analysis to assess whether we had obtained evidence to support the global or holistic analysis of Discourses we had made at the beginning.

Even with such brief excerpt of classroom transcript, presenting every analytic move is prohibited by space constraints of the chapter (a point which should be emphasized in regard to the amount of analytic time and detail necessary for conducting such rigorous work). The analysis of one brief excerpt of classroom conversation can take days to complete, thus making the work of the careful critical sociocultural theorist laborious. In addition, what we present here is an integration of activity, cultural, and critical discourse analysis, requiring several layers of analysis. As we wrote the chapter, we chose the most deeply saturated points to put forward in the final written product. As a result, we do not present every activity move or linguistic construction that we analyzed. Our analytic presentation focuses broadly on the particular research questions that we have already outlined.

## THE CLASSROOM DATA EXEMPLAR

The classroom represented in the following exemplar is an eighth-grade English language arts class in a kindergarten through eighth grade, two-way, bilingual immersion public school of choice in a large urban area. The population of the city is just over 1,000,000, with the metropolitan area just over 4,000,000. The city itself is populated primarily by African Americans, although this particular school is in a predominantly Latino/Latina community within the city. These data are drawn from a larger, ongoing ethnography of the schools and community conducted by Moje since 1998.

### Participants

The participants in, or subjects of, the whole class activity include the teacher and her 30 students. The female teacher is of Latin American heritage. She emigrated to the United States approximately 30 years ago, and is now a United States citizen. She refers to herself as an "immigrant." She lives in town outside an urban area and would be categorized as of upper

middle class socioeconomic status, although she describes her upbringing as a member of a well-educated, but economically struggling, family. She spends about an hour and a half driving to and from the city every day because she professes a deep commitment to urban education, and particularly, to the education of Latino/Latina youth.

The students were 2 African Americans and 28 Latinos/Latinas (this indexes both male and female participants) who claim different national origins, but were predominantly Mexican or Chicano/Chicana. The class was evenly divided into male and female students. All of the students were bilingual and most were biliterate (although fluency levels vary). Individual socioeconomic information is not available for students; however, the majority of the community lives below the poverty line and the majority of these students lived in working-class or low-income settings.

The participants who speak in the particular transcript excerpted in this chapter include the teacher, three Latinas (i.e., girls) who identify as Chicana (1) and Mexican (2), and one Latino (i.e., boy) who identifies as Mexican. All four of these students are high achieving students in terms of participation and grades in this classroom. The remainder of the students did not speak, although field notes indicate that they attended to the discussion that is represented here.

### The Activity

The class was reading *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967). The object of the activity—a class discussion—was to choose a topic or thesis prompted by the book and to defend that thesis in writing (i.e., this discussion is preparation for an essay-writing activity to follow). They had been reading and discussing the book for about 2 weeks when these field notes and audio transcript were taken, and the transcript begins with a young woman, Pilar, making a comment in reference to a comment just made by another student about a particular aspect of the book. We chose this particular exemplar because it represents a moment of activity in which the cultural models that mediate between the event and its operating discourses are particularly evident in supporting certain comments and constraining others:

- 1 PILAR: He said there should be more policemen to take care of that?
- 2 Well, some police, they just stop somebody who looks like they're in a
- 3 gang . . . They're judging them.
- 4 TEACHER: Okay, what is the point that you have? What is a statement
- 5 that you make?
- 6 PILAR: That gangs really aren't all that bad. Because it's like have a
- 7 second family, because they're willing to risk their lives for you, for
- 8 your safety. People think if you're in a gang, it's all bad, that you have

- 9 to get in trouble. It doesn't. Some gang members tell you, "Don't get  
10 in fights when you're at school . . . Or you don't have to do drugs."  
11 They tell you to do the right thing. They don't just say do drugs and  
12 do all this stuff.  
13 TEACHER: They're like family . . . Who do you think would go to a  
14 gang?  
15 PILAR: It's not really a kind of person, anybody can join a gang for any  
16 kind of reason, because they'll always be watching your back, they'll  
17 never leave you alone. You can just get in a gang, you don't have to  
18 fight, you don't have to do drugs, you don't have to do all the things  
19 that people think. They're not going to make you . . . They let you  
20 choose.  
21 TEACHER: So they don't make you fight or do drugs.  
22 PILAR: Most of the gangs that I know, they don't make you do drugs.  
23 TEACHER: Anyone have a comment?  
24 JAMES: A reason why kids join gangs is to obtain power . . . Good or  
25 bad . . . But in many situations it's bad. There's always a risk.  
26 PILAR: Most gangs don't go out looking for trouble. If someone wants  
27 to mess with them and they, like, make fun of them or do something  
28 to them, they're not just going to stand there, they're going to do  
29 something about it.  
30 JOVANA: I think in gangs, there's like good people and bad people.  
31 There might be people that tell you—  
32 TEACHER: Do you know of a gang that has good people?  
33 JOVANA: Yeah.  
34 TEACHER: You do? What specifically do they do in that gang so you  
35 know they're good people?  
36 ELMIRA: Like, when they're in a gang they try to help their family out  
37 . . . Pay bills . . . And if there's younger people in gangs, they tell them  
38 to stay in school . . . Won't make you sell drugs . . . They're not going  
39 to put a gun to your head.  
40 TEACHER: Anyone else?  
41 JAMES: Do you know the name of a gang, Pilar?  
42 PILAR: Yeah, lots of 'em.  
43 JAMES: Tell me one.  
44 Pilar looks questioningly at T, who tells her to go ahead.  
45 PILAR: The Counts, Sureños—  
46 The teacher breaks in to tell a story about her teaching at another  
47 school, where the Counts were dominant. She says that they were  
48 "always fighting." A conversation ensues about why gangs fight with  
49 one another. The conversation then returns to good versus bad gangs,  
50 with James initiating the questioning:  
51 JAMES: Would you say that Sureños are a good gang?

- 52 PILAR: Like I said, there are good people and bad people in a gang.  
53 It depends who you go and hang with.  
54 JAMES: But you said Sureños are a good gang.  
55 PILAR: I can't really answer that . . . I mean . . . [she trails off]  
56 JOVANA: I have friends who are Counts and friends who are Sureños,  
57 and I think they're both nice.  
58 JAMES: If they're so nice, why are they writing graffiti on the walls of  
59 the school?

## A CRITICAL SOCIOCULTURAL ANALYSIS

Our analysis yielded several patterns in relation to the four research questions posed at the start of the chapter. First, both the students' and the teacher's experiences and subjectivities were simultaneously invited and constrained in the classroom activity.

Second, identities were enacted and recognized in particular ways throughout the activity, and these enactments and recognitions carried implications for what both the teacher and students said and did. Pilar, for example, ended the discussion by backing off her earlier claims, moving from a forceful claim-making position to a faltering, self-questioning position by the end of the exchange. Other students—students who were certainly knowledgeable about gang activity—remained silent throughout the entire discussion. These enactments of identity—whether as knowledgeable participant or as silent, disinterested bystander—ultimately shaped the opportunities to learn and to teach in the activity.

Third, the enactment and recognition of identities were shaped by the invoking of particular cultural models throughout the discussion, particularly models of goodness and badness, power and authority, risk and safety, and individual and group. Finally, we noted a number of moments of agency, some of which remade the activity by changing the activity's objects, and others of which remade identities of participants within the activity. These agentic moments, we illustrate, were not always positive for all members of the class, and, in fact, had implications for some class members' opportunities to learn within the discussion. Together, these four themes point to different opportunities to learn for different people within the discussion. What follows is our analysis according to these four patterns.

### Subjectivities: Invited and Constrained

Both youths' and teacher's experiences and subjectivities were invited, and even in some ways incorporated, into the learning activity, but were also constrained by cultural models and discourses at work within the larger

activity system. For example, from the first line of the discussion, Pilar's experience with gangs and with law enforcement officials is invited and incorporated into the discussion to the point that Pilar actually reframes the object of the activity from the teacher's goal of teaching students to make and defend a thesis to the goal of debating the goodness and badness of gangs relative to other groups in society (lines 1–3 and 8–12). But what were the subject positions in this exchange, and how did the activity make a space and constrain them at the same time?

To address these questions and expand on the pattern we observed, we must first ask what the learning activity was in this exemplar. In this particular exchange, we define the activity at its outset as a classroom discussion of a novel engaged in for the purpose of modeling and brainstorming for a future writing exercise of making and defending a thesis. More specifically, the goals or objects are to probe the main themes of the book, and, highlighted in this particular exchange, to prompt students to make and defend a thesis (inspired by or in relation to a novel's premise).

An analysis of this particular activity, together with analyses of years of additional data from this teacher's classroom and interview data, suggests that the teacher's driving motivation or desire—an aspect of her subjectivity—was to produce student learning, as measured, in particular, by state standardized tests. For the students—who have also been studied for several years, via classroom, home, and community observation and interview, the driving motivation and desire (or subjectivity) appears to be to achieve or meet objects of the classroom activity, which revolve around learning how to write a thesis, according to the teacher's predefined standard. Both of these goal sets reveal something about the teacher's and students' subjectivities: They wish to succeed in their particular roles as students and teacher, as defined by cultural models of learning literacy represented in essay writing, novel reading, and standardized tests. As the activity progressed, however, additional subjectivities, motives, and desires on the part of at least four students became evident.

The students' talk suggests a desire to express opinions on or concerns with how gangs are represented in the novel, in their classroom discussion, and in their community. For example, when Pilar made the following statement in lines 8 to 12, early in the discussion, she expanded the activity beyond its clearly defined goal of learning how to make and defend a thesis:

PILAR: That gangs really aren't all that bad. Because it's like you have a second family, because they're willing to risk their lives for you, for your safety. People think if you're in a gang, it's all bad, that you have to get in trouble. It doesn't. Some gang members tell you, "Don't get in fights when you're at school" . . . or "You don't have to do drugs." They tell you to do the right thing. They don't just say do drugs and do all this stuff.

This shift in the nature of the activity served to reveal not only the subjectivities of some of the students, but also a number of different ways that students enacted identities and that their identities were recognized, thus leading to a second pattern we observed. In brief, we documented students' enacting a host of identities throughout this exchange, ranging from that of "good student" who went along with the demands of activity, to "gang-identified student," who argued with larger cultural models of goodness and badness, to "gang-resistant student," who called on mainstream cultural models of goodness and badness to challenge the claims made by Pilar and other students that gangs were "not really all that bad." These and a number of other identity enactments and recognitions became evident through discursive analyses, as presented in the next section.

### Identity Enactments and Recognitions in the Activity

In making her claim (lines 6–11), Pilar revealed not only her motives and desires, but she also enacted several identities. First, Pilar enacted a willing student identity by gamely producing a claim based on the reading, at the teacher's request (line 6: "That gangs really aren't all that bad."). She simultaneously enacted a gang-connected (but not gang "member") identity as she introduced and supported the claim in the subsequent lines.

Pilar's move here was agentic as she responded to the teacher's request for a thesis statement, but refocused it slightly from the subject of her previous statement (lines 1–3), which foregrounded the actions of law enforcement officers in reference to a comment about the novel. Her refocused statement maintained the question of what counts as good and bad in society from her first statement, but moved gangs to the foreground. Pilar's sentence construction across the two comments (lines 1–3 and 8–12) raised the question of motives of socially sanctioned authority figures and suggested, with the contrast of "policeman" in utterance 1 and "gang" in utterance 2, that institutions deemed "good" are not always good, whereas individuals deemed "bad" may not always be bad. Her positioning of the police in lines 1 to 3 ("they just stop" and "They're judging them"), contrasted with the clause "somebody who looks like they're in a gang" (line 2), signaled a questioning of the motives and judgments of authority figures. With this discursive construction, Pilar implied that police officers often operate on stereotypes ("who looks like") and questioned whether socially acceptable uses of power are always good.

Pilar's statement was also an agentic identity enactment as she claimed knowledge of gangs, but hedged her claim with the phrase "aren't all that bad," using the qualifier "all that" to make evident her belief that some gang practices are bad. Pilar also hedged her claim by naming practices commonly associated with gangs (fights at school and doing drugs), but

then debunking the stereotype that gangs always make members engage in such activities. Moreover, Pilar used the concept of *gang* to deconstruct typical notions of goodness ("People think if you're in a gang, it's all bad, that you have to get in trouble. It doesn't"), whereas she also reinscribed some conceptions of goodness when she argued that gangs tell "you 'don't get in fights at school' or 'you don't have to do drugs.' They tell you to do the right thing." That is, she acknowledged fighting and drug taking as "bad" practices often linked to gang membership, but then claimed that gangs, in fact, do not engage in such activities. Through this strategic argument, Pilar built a safe space for argumentation, claiming knowledge of gangs while labeling certain stereotypical gang practices as negative.

At the same time, however, Pilar's discourse also positioned her as a member of neither group (policemen and gangs are both referred to as *they* and *them*), but connected to and sympathetic with gangs through her use of the second person pronoun, *you*, as a recipient of a gang's protection and advice. Thus, her foregrounding of "gangs" was coupled with a moderate modality (e.g., "it's like *you* have a second family"), through which Pilar signaled that she is not in a gang, but knowledgeable enough to speak about them from some experience, albeit distanced through the second person pronoun. Thus, even as Pilar critiqued common Discourses about goodness and badness, she played inside an activity system that she recognized as not approving of gang activity. She did not, for example, make the claim, "Gangs are good for society" or "Some gang members have told *me* 'Don't get in fights at school.'" In making her claim the way she did, however, she nudged the boundaries of the activity's original object and beyond the activity system of the school. That is, she focused on conceptions of gangs that contradict dominant Discourses of the activity system, while maintaining a relatively acceptable identity as knowledgeable of, but not involved in, gang activity. This simple, but agentic, conversational move had implications for the remainder of the activity and for opportunities to learn and to teach within the activity.

The teacher, in fact, then took up the shift that Pilar had introduced but reframed—officially, albeit temporarily—the object of the activity with her restatement ("They're like family") and her question ("Who do you think would go to a gang?") in lines 13–14. In doing so, the teacher both opened space in the activity for participants' desires or motives beyond the defined activity object and simultaneously maintained a focus on the activity's object (learning to make a thesis statement or writing an essay) by asking for clarification of the point and for formation of the statement into a thesis statement. This, too, can be said to be an agentic move on the teacher's part. The teacher's willingness to take up Pilar's claim can be read as her belief that this topic—although perhaps potentially sensitive—may have been motivating enough to the students that it could serve

as a rich opportunity to learn how to make a claim and back it up with evidence.

Data from teacher interview after the activity suggest that indeed this was the case ("This is something that they care about, know about, want to talk about"). In addition, the teacher's own subjective experiences as a marginalized subject (she talked often of her early years as an immigrant to the United States and of the oppression she experienced) and as a teacher, imbued her with the desire to offer an opportunity for youth to bring their experiences into the classroom, to grapple with the arguments, and to use their subjectivities as resources for learning how to write strong, persuasive essays. Simultaneously, however, the teacher monitored the depth of the conversation and used language to distance herself from the content ("They're like family") because of the potentially sensitive nature of discourse about gangs within the activity system of school. Her own identity as public school teacher and authority figure was enacted in this system in a way that reinforced prevailing Discourses about authority, gangs, goodness, and badness, but her identity was made and remade in relation to her students as she established herself as a teacher who was willing to engage students in conversations about gangs (and other topics students cared about), even as she acknowledged pressures and her own desires to achieve high scores on the state standardized tests.

James represents another set of identity enactments worth exploring in some depth. Relatively early in the conversation (lines 24–25), James enacted a nongang—perhaps even antigang identity—with the following claim: "kids join gangs [is] to obtain power . . . Good or bad . . . But in many situations it's bad. There's always a risk." James's statement works within the activity object; that is, he debated Pilar's thesis and he engaged with the topic of gangs. He also played inside the activity system of school by establishing his stance on gangs as negative in direct challenge to Pilar's claim. His language use also distances him from gang participation. For example, he used the generic noun *kids*, rather than *you*, *kids I know*, or even *they*, in his claim, "Kids join gangs to obtain power." James's use of *kids* enacted an extremely low modality that distanced him even as he made a claim about the motivations of other people. His use of *kids* rather than *people* also implied that James may have wanted to position the behaviors of gangs as juvenile or temporary, something people would grow out of if they were given the chance.

Later in the transcript (line 41), James's conversational move, "Do you know the name of a gang, Pilar?" appears to come out of the blue. His question called out Pilar (who is his friend, as documented in other observations and interviews), pushing her to name her knowledge and firsthand experience and to enact an identity that could be recognized as gang connected. Pilar did not back down from this potential demand and owned,

through her discourse, extensive knowledge. She claimed not only knowledge of one gang name, but "lots of 'em" (line 42).

In an even later segment (line 51), James was more direct in his challenge to Pilar. His body movement—turning directly to face her—and his use of the name of an actual gang set—of which he knew Pilar possessed knowledge (as documented in ethnographic interview data), indicated a high level of confrontation and a high modality enactment of an antigang identity embedded in a seemingly simple question. Pilar's response (lines 52–55) is curious on many levels. First, she stated, "Like I said," but a review of the transcript indicates that she did not distinguish between gangs and individual members of gangs; in fact, Jovana had made that distinction. Pilar, however, took up that distinction, seeming to recognize here that even within the relative "safety" of this classroom space, some claims may be dangerous. Pilar, in the face of this direct request for knowledge of a particular gang, backed off her claim and enacted a different identity. In addition, the phrase, "It depends on who you go and hang with" (line 53) introduced a condition to her claim that "gangs really aren't all that bad," a condition that she may have introduced as a way of backing off the strength of her earlier claim.

James, however, refused to let Pilar back out of her claim, misquoting her in his attempt to force her into taking a position (i.e., Pilar never actually stated that Sureños is a good gang). What is at work in James's refusal to let Pilar back away from her claim about goodness of gangs? And why does he push her to claim Sureños as a good gang? His modality is high in the confrontation, foregrounding the argument and facing Pilar and emphasizing, albeit inaccurately, "*you* said." Given this high modality and the foregrounding of Pilar in the sentence itself, together with the use of the conjunction *but* to indicate a contradiction to her previous statement, it seems evident that James was not offering this comment as a friendly question.

At least four possible explanations come to mind, all reflecting directly on James's identity enactments and agency: First, James could simply like to argue, seeking to find holes in the logic of others. James had identified law as a possible future career, and he may have viewed arguing points as an enjoyable pursuit. He may also have been enacting an identity as the class debater and future lawyer. This explanation is challenged, however, by the fact that he actually misquoted Pilar and attributed to her a claim that she did not make, thus diminishing the force and skill of his argument. In addition, ethnographic data over 2 years do not support the idea that James was a vocal class debater, although he did participate actively and did at times ask questions of the teacher.

A second explanation is that James was strongly antigang in his orientation to the world and hoped to represent his identity as antigang. His argument could have been driven by rejection of Pilar's view. Our ethnographic

data do not support this interpretation, although it is true that James did not consider himself "gang identified."

A third possibility is that James was not only progang, but that he was pro-Sureños. He may be trying to force Pilar to claim Sureños against her will. Claiming a set—by saying, for example, that one set is "good"—is a primary means of identifying one's allegiance to a set. James could, then, have been enacting an identity as a good Sureño, an identity that would likely be recognized only by other students knowledgeable about gangs (and not by the teacher). This move, if accurate, would be a particularly strategic and agentic identity enactment on James's part as it takes in both the constraints posed by the activity system of schooling and society and the rewards possible in a peer-based activity system. Again, our ethnographic data, however, do not indicate support for this hypothesis; we never documented evidence of James as deeply knowledgeable of or involved in gang practices.

A fourth hypothesis is that James was trying to position himself as a "good student" or "good person," by setting himself up—within this activity, activity system, and its attendant Discourses—as antigang and as committed to the original activity object, that of making and defending a thesis. This explanation seems most defensible according to our broader data corpus, but some hybrid of most of these possibilities is probable.

It should be clear that any and all of these hypotheses are possible and that without access to a larger ethnographic and cultural studies perspective, it would be impossible to determine with any degree of certainty James's motives and desires. The larger ethnographic project allows us to hypothesize about James's goals in this activity, as well as to document his general "good student" identity; his frustration with and fear of gang activity, and his lack of participation in gang-related practices. Thus, we can assert—drawing from a wealth of data framed by cultural studies—that James's motives here in the activity were to challenge Pilar's belief system about gangs. He was, perhaps, also influenced by his desire to appear to be a good student, but his desire was not superficial. He was not playing at this identity, but was enacting a sense of self that was consistent with how he saw his larger world. This move was agentic (and risky) in the sense that James challenged a dominant perspective—thinking gangs are cool—among the other youth in the class. His status with the group—as sincere, good, and smart—enabled him to enact an antigang identity, even to the degree of openly challenging Pilar, a popular friend of many students in the room and well liked by the teacher.

The move also demonstrated a different kind of agency, one enabled by the workings of power within the activity system, power that allowed the young Latinas (girls) in the class to make claims about gangs being good, but that did not allow young Latinos (boys) to make similar claims. James—as a Latino—was enabled to make antigang claims, whereas the other boys



in the room are not enabled to make their views of gangs—mainly positive—known. Were they to argue for the goodness of gangs—in support of Pilar, Jovana, and Elmira—they would risk future surveillance for possible gang membership. Thus, the agency of the other Latino boys in the class—many of whom were, indeed, gang-identified, is constrained in this discussion. If one supports the position that being able to discuss beliefs and opinions is a useful learning and brainstorming tool for enhancing one's writing, then it would seem that this constraint has a potential impact on some students' opportunities to learn sophisticated writing skills that depend on arguing one's beliefs and supporting them with evidence.

### Activity Systems, Cultural Models, and Discourses

References to the activity system raise the question for an activity theorist of what is the activity system that surrounds and mediates this particular activity. Because we are integrating activity theory with cultural and discursive analyses, we also ask about the cultural models and Discourses reflected and reinscribed through participants' talk and action. In our analysis, the activity system is constituted by the school, the local community, the school district, and the state (via state assessment, around which the teacher makes curricular decisions), as well as by youth cultural groups, ethnic cultural groups, and popular cultural texts and Discourses. The participants of the activity system include all of the aforementioned participants, as well as administrators, parents, community leaders, and other teachers, despite the fact that the classroom doors are closed. In that sense, all of those people and structures—and their voices, experiences, and subjectivities—are also present in the room and are framed in the goals of this one particular activity.

The goals of the system, however, are quite extensive and complicated. A dilemma in such analyses lies in how to account for multiple and intersecting systems of power that may work in contradictory ways in any given participant's action and discourse. For example, one goal of the system or systems underlying the choice of the novel, *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967), might be to position urban street life as problematic even as the novel draws youth in by possibly reflecting their experiences or by playing on popular youth cultural texts (e.g., more than one young woman in the class mentioned how much she liked the actor Matt Dillon in the movie version of the novel). Hence, driven by the activity system's cultural models or Discourses, the teacher chooses a novel that features gang members as protagonists, but simultaneously provides a strong moral against gang activity.

If, however, the influence of popular culture texts and Discourses are accounted for in the activity system, and if the goals of the students in the activity are emphasized—rather than the teacher as goal setter—then the goals of a popular youth cultural activity system might be to call into ques-

tion mainstream views of gangs or urban life, an interpretation that seems buoyed by the transcript shown here. Thus, the intersection of many different systemic goals requires a deeply complex analysis that must be read from many different points of view and that must account for the role of larger structures—acro-structures—being localized in the very particular talk and actions of participants in any given activity system.

That said, the structures and content of the utterances in this excerpt appear to be shaped by several activity systems and accompanying cultural models and Discourses. For example, the teacher probed Pilar's claim as she did in part because she was a teacher in public school classroom with a set of learning objectives to which she must teach. Interview data with the teacher reveal that she has, in fact, designed the activity with the state standardized test in mind (constructed responses requiring the making and defense of a thesis are *de rigueur* for the state test). Her seemingly non-committal probing may also have been a function of constraints she feels from the conversational rules of the activity system and its cultural model that silences explicit talk about unsanctioned activities. Like most teachers, this teacher was hesitant to encourage students to talk openly about gangs, which are considered unsuitable material for classrooms. The teacher was thus faced with a dilemma: She had, as the object of the activity, asked students to make a thesis and defend it. And yet, the thesis made by one student involved problematic content. However, because she believed (information obtained throughout interviews conducted over 4 years) that young people must be encouraged to talk about issues, she was also hesitant to shut down the exchange. The teacher resolved this dilemma through the structure of her utterances, in which she probed with questions, but did not necessarily support the statements being made. The only statement she offered provided a negative instance of her own experience with gangs (lines 46–49). And many of her utterances, although seemingly neutral questions, were tinged with a skeptical tone or interrupted students while speaking (lines 32, 34, 46). Thus, she allowed the conversation to continue, but via the structure (and content) of her utterances, she neither approved nor openly disapproved of the content.

The teacher's interruption of Pilar's naming of gangs (line 46) is an example of the play of larger cultural models and Discourses at play in the talk within this classroom. The interruption seems prompted by mention of the Counts. The interruption served to constrain the specific conversation about gangs, or to reframe it, because the teacher's talk about the Counts was framed in negative terms (they were "always fighting"), reflecting larger Discourses about gangs. The fact that the conversational turn was an obvious interruption, combined with her framing of gangs in negative terms, suggests an intentional turn away from more explicit, and possibly positive, talk about specific gangs. Indeed, the teacher's framing of gangs as "always fighting" reversed the flow of the conversation in which gangs were rep-

resented as good and in which individual gang members could be "good people" (lines 30–31) and took the activity full circle from Pilar's initial claim that "gangs really aren't all that bad" (line 6). Through this discursive move, the Discourse of gangs as problematic was invoked and reinscribed.

One can also interpret student utterances as formed within the school as activity system. The exchange between James and Pilar (lines 51–59) is particularly noteworthy in terms of the identities enacted, the cultural models and Discourses invoked, and the youths' awareness of multiple activity systems and other participants' desires and subject positions. For example, consider again James's conversational move in line 41 and following (beginning with "Do you know the name of a gang, Pilar?"). With his imperative command, "Tell me one" (line 43), James reiterated the demand for an identity enactment as gang knowledgeable, if not gang identified. Pilar, however, demonstrated her awareness that speaking the name of a gang could be considered inappropriate within the walls of the school, that is, within the activity system, through her embodied, but unspoken, move of looking for permission from the teacher (line 44). With that move, Pilar thus indicated that she was aware of a larger system at work constraining or enabling her talk. However, even as Pilar turned to the teacher as authority figure within an activity system that might frown on their conversation, she also demonstrated her trust that the teacher would not judge her for her knowledge; thus, her microlevel relationship with her teacher mediated the power of larger Discourses in the activity system. Pilar thus negotiated her position and participated in the workings of power at both micro and macro, personal and institutional, levels.

Later, James's question to Pilar in line 51 then underscores the teacher's Discursive move of reframing gangs as bad, and functions as a repeated and explicit challenge to her framing of gangs as good. His question, "Would you say that Sureños are a *good* gang?" explicitly invoked larger cultural models of what counts as goodness, and, as outlined previously, pushed Pilar into backing down from her claim (line 55) as she appeared to realize that maintaining her claim would require her to reveal Discursive commitments that would not be approved in the activity system. Thus, although willing to enact an identity as gang-knowledgeable early on, Pilar appeared to realize as James pushed her to claim greater knowledge, that revealing too much knowledge, and thus enacting too connected an identity, would be at odds with the cultural models and Discourses that were taking hold as the conversation progressed.

### Moments of Agency, or Not

A number of moments of "strategic making and remaking of selves" occur throughout the discussion. One obvious moment appears at the start of the

transcript, when Pilar introduced the comparison of the goodness of sanctioned authority figures to the goodness of gang members. Her introduction of a potentially risky topic into the activity, and her teacher's take-up of the topic, allowed Pilar to reframe the activity from the teacher's original activity object. James's critique of Pilar's comments represents another moment of agency, a moment in which James strategically enacted any number of identities, as detailed in the previous section.

Instances occurred as well in which both students' and the teacher's agency seems constrained. The teacher, for example, seems constrained by the activity system of schooling, standardization, and accountability. Although she desired to provide a space for students to discuss issues and topics they care about, she also wished to teach students the skills by which their growth will be measured and to which she was held accountable. Thus, the activity system of schooling, replete with cultural models about what counts as literacy learning (e.g., the ability to make and defend a thesis, the ability to draw from personal experience to make an argument), supported her decision to engage students' perspectives—even on gang practices—in the discussion. At the same time, cultural models of goodness and authority also spoke their Discourses in this exchange and constrained how much the teacher was willing to let the discussion go on unchecked. Her interruption in lines 46 to 50 was an agentic move designed to signal to students that although they were talking about gangs, she was not condoning them and that, in fact, in her experience, they were "always" problematic (signaled through the phrase "always fighting," line 48; she did not, for example, say "They had a lot of fights, or even, "They fought often.""). An interview with the teacher following the discussion suggested that she felt uncomfortable with the topic, even as she felt strongly committed to providing a space for students to "talk about what matters to them." These conflicting models and Discourses (models of gangs as always and only bad, so bad that one doesn't talk about them versus models of student-centered English language arts classrooms in which youth read and write from their experiences) both support and constrain her own identity enactments and her teaching decisions.

Just as the teacher's talk was constrained by dominant cultural models and larger goals of the activity system, Pilar's agency to pursue a complex argument (i.e., to argue for gang members as not necessarily bad) was likewise constrained. At the end of the transcript (line 55), for example, Pilar appeared to have had second thoughts about either her claim or her safety in speaking her views so vocally as evidenced by her failure to take on James's challenge, in accordance with the demands of the newly defined activity object. Her discourse in this utterance was distinctly different from her prior utterances, which were spoken with an ethos that suggested not only confidence, but certainty. Not only her words ("I really can't answer



that"), but also her hesitation and her eventual trailing off (atypical behavior for Pilar, as documented by long-term ethnographic data collection with her), suggest her unwillingness or inability to take the argument further. The atypicality of her behavior in this instance when compared to other similar interactions suggests that she perceived some confrontation or risk in his challenge. James's comments are coupled with the teacher's comments on her own experiences with gangs. Pilar's awareness of the other participants' views, together with her own understanding of dominant discourses on gangs within the activity system of schooling, may have led her to rethink the stance she had taken and the identity, as knowledgeable of gangs, she had enacted.

Jovana's agency to argue for an alternative view of gang practices, however, seems unconstrained, as she jumped in to take a stand on the question, actually claiming with high modality (lines 56–57: "*I have friends who are*") friendly relationships with members of both sets. Again, Jovana emphasized the individual as gang member, and she smoothly, strategically positioned herself through her talk as neither Count nor Sureño by claiming friends from both sets, although not claiming membership in either. Further, as the other members of the class and the teacher know, if one were jumped into (initiated) full membership in one gang set, they would not openly claim friendships with members of another set. Thus, Jovana's discourse simultaneously positions herself as knowledgeable of and yet distanced from actual gang practice. What allowed Jovana to pursue this line of argument, seemingly unconstrained by obvious Discourses of gangs as always and only bad, when Pilar appeared to reevaluate the identity she was enacting in the discussion and other students were silent throughout the entire exchange? One possible explanation is that Jovana's enactment of a gang-connected identity, her claiming of friends, may be enabled by her phenotype. Although Jovana identified as Mexican, she acknowledged that her white skin, light hair, and freckles allow her to "act White" (Moje & Ciechanowski, 2002). Jovana, as documented in multiple interviews and in this classroom excerpt, has repeatedly acknowledged the value of acting White even as she identified as Mexican, and thus she acknowledges the power of race-based cultural models and Discourses at work in all the activity systems in which she finds herself. Thus, Jovana's ability to identify openly with gang friends is a function not only of her discursive strategies, but also of her positioning in a racialized activity system that may read the talk and actions of dark-skinned youth as problematic, whereas accepting the talk and actions of light-skinned youth as safe, even when that talk and action is aimed at deconstructing dominant Discourses. To know this about Jovana, of course, requires ethnographic observation and interviewing from a cultural studies perspective, over time, coupled with a discursive analysis of this particular activity and its activity system.

Each of these examples represents only a few of the agentic moves made by students in the class. Even the silence of the majority of the class can be analyzed, for example, as agentic. For example, when questioned later about why no other boys in the class spoke in this discussion about gangs, Pilar and another young woman, Yolanda, hypothesized that the boys, in particular, might have been unwilling to reveal their knowledge of gang practices because they knew that boys were more likely to be considered active gang participants than were girls. Thus, these young women recognized how any personal knowledge of or experience with gangs might have been viewed by the teacher. The young women suggested that they were more able to talk freely about gangs because school officials would be less likely to suspect them of actual gang participation than they would young Latino boys. If the girls' hypothesis is correct, then the young men's silence could be considered agentic in the sense that they strategically enacted identities of neutral observers in the exchange. Although it could be argued that their silence did not challenge Discourses or cultural models that position young Latino boys as likely gang members, we assert that their silence was, in fact, agentic in the sense that it did not reinscribe those Discourses. However, their silence, coupled with James's strenuous arguments against the positive power of gangs, also potentially served to remake stereotypical identities of young Latino men in the space of that classroom.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This analysis helps to illustrate the role of microrelations and macrorelations of power—via cultural models and Discourses—in shaping people's subjective experiences, identity enactments, and agency in a given activity, but what does it mean for learning? The central questions with which we went into this analysis were what did people learn in this activity, and, perhaps more important, what were their opportunities to learn (or to teach)? In particular, one might ask, whether it matters that these young people and their teacher were constrained as they tried to argue about street gang practices in relation to a novel they were reading and in relation to questions about goodness and badness in society? We want to argue that although the students in this exchange did learn some useful literacy skills and some knowledge about exploring a novel's content by examining one's own subjective experience, the depth of their learning was constrained by their unwillingness to speak against prevailing Discourses and cultural models about gangs. We do not wish to argue that they should have left the class believing that gang practices are good or even that their beliefs should have been unquestioned, but we do wish to argue that their beliefs were not fully

examined—and thus their literacy skills not fully developed—because their activity was constrained by these models and Discourses. In what follows, we outline what these youth did learn and how their opportunities to learn were even more constrained.

First, this exchange is evidence that students had read, discussed, and analyzed what is now considered a classic piece of young adult literature, *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967). Thus, they experienced what we might consider a conventional literature discussion and learned important skills for exploring literature and making personal, as well as societal connections to literature. (Evidence of their learning was documented in multiple observations beyond the snippet reported here and in analysis of essays the students wrote.) Second, the data here indicate that most of the students had made connections from the novel *The Outsiders* to their own experiences, as illustrated by Pilar's turn from the novel to her own experiences with law enforcement officials and gang members. These connections shaped their engagement with and comprehension of the novel, to the extent that all students interviewed throughout the year ( $n = 20$  in formal interviews, more in informal classroom interviews) nominated *The Outsiders* as their "favorite" reading of the year. They were also able to recount the story with accuracy, even remembering character names and plot details. Third, as suggested in this data excerpt, each student eventually wrote an opinion essay, drawing from main ideas in the novel. Thus, they learned to identify main ideas, connect those ideas to current societal issues, and write a thesis on those issues. A review of a sample of student essays indicated that students learned to make a reasonably clear statement of opinion and to use information or experience to support their opinions or theses (as evidenced in the analysis of student essays, not included here). In doing so, the students learned that the activity system of the school and a specific activity object could include their personal, subjective experiences and beliefs even as they set out to learn mainstream communicative practices.

That said, students also learned that they could go only so far in weaving their experiences and subjectivities into school-based learning activities. Dominant cultural models and Discourses that positioned their experiences and discourses as outside the norm shaped the students' willingness to argue in extended ways for their particular views. In many ways, this learning was valuable, as students refined their awareness that they had to monitor their communicative practices depending on the discourse community in which they were immersed, always a valuable lesson for young people who will need to cross many different discourse communities in their pursuit of educational and economic success (cf. Delpit, 1988; Guerra, this volume). In that sense, they learned to enact identities associated with certain ways of reading and writing (Discourses), which many scholars (e.g., Gee, 2001; Lave, 1996) claim to be critical aspects of learning.

It could also be said, however, that what they learned, or practiced, was a kind of self-monitoring or silencing that could serve them well in mainstream social and educational settings. Such learning does not, however, question or restructure how certain cultural models and Discourses empower some and disenfranchise others. These students did not, that is, discuss why and how gangs have come to exist in society, and they did not examine the relationship of gangs to sanctioned authority figures, despite the fact that such a theme is a central one in the novel they were reading. They did not learn to analyze the difference between individual behavior ("there are good people and bad people in gangs") and group behavior (gangs as "always fighting"), also one of the novel's themes and an important concept in social sciences that links to the core democratic values students are expected to learn in social studies classes (e.g., examinations of the relationship between individual freedom and the common good). Further, they did not learn to ask questions about what motivates gang behaviors, why particular kinds of gangs develop in particular kinds of communities (e.g., street gangs in urban environments and "skaters" in suburban environments), or why certain groups of people come to be labeled as "gangs," whereas other groups are called "clubs," "groups," or "frats," and why some groupings are never even identified in popular and legal discourses. Again, these are all mainstream sociological concepts that these youth could have addressed in relation to even this very small snippet of literature discussion.

One might argue that these topics were not the point of the learning activity, and thus, do not represent missed opportunities to learn. We argue, however, that in failing to examine these issues in depth, these youth failed to develop deep and sophisticated literacy skills and strategies for delving into the major themes of the novel, making complex arguments, synthesizing ideas across texts and personal or cultural experiences, and for examining their experiences in relation to larger societal systems, all aspects of skills measured in most state standardized assessments and in national assessments.

In that sense, then, their opportunities to learn were compromised by the power of cultural models, Discourses, and activity systems that prevent people from "simply speak[ing] of anything, when we like or where we like" (Foucault, 1972, p. 216). The students, like any student, brought their subjectivities to bear on their reading of the novel, and in brief moments, they enacted identities and remade identities that had the potential to support and constrain their learning. The students' opportunities to learn, then, were shaped by the relationship they had with this particular teacher (which actually allowed them to feel some safety in initiating the discussion), by the activity she planned and then allowed them to reframe, by the activity system in which this exchange had occurred, and, we would argue, by the

Discourses and cultural models that slipped into the classroom to support and constrain their learning.

Finally, it is important to note that the combination of activity theory, cultural theory, and critical discourse analysis allowed for an analysis of opportunity to learn that we have carried out here. These three analytic frameworks weave together crucial questions of how identity, agency, and power constrain and enable what counts as knowledge as well as who is allowed to own, receive, develop, or disseminate it within goal-oriented activity systems. Bringing these perspectives together allows the researcher to look for the unpredictable flow of power, for cultural models and Discourses at work, for action toward goals.

In sum, we have tried to demonstrate that the identities that are recognized in classrooms and the discourses and cultural models that operate therein have everything to do with the positions students are willing to take up and the agency they have to resignify, disrupt, or examine prevailing discourses. Identity, agency, and power are not peripheral to learning. They are central. Activity theory alone does not provide the tools needed to analyze how these aspects of learning operate in and through classroom exchanges of the sort we include in this chapter. But combining activity theory with cultural theory and critical discourse analysis in explicit and systematic ways, researchers can conduct critical sociocultural analyses that can move the field toward a deeper understanding of literacy learning.

## REFERENCES

- Bordo, S. (1993). *Unbearable weight: Feminism, western culture and the body*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Brandt, D., & Clinton, K. (2002). Limits of the local: Expanding perspectives on literacy as a social practice. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 34, 337-356.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of 'sex'*. New York: Routledge.
- Chouliaraki, L., & Fairclough, N. (1999). *Discourse in late modernity: Rethinking critical discourse analysis*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press.
- Davies, B. (1993). *Shards of glass: Children reading and writing beyond gendered identities*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.
- Daydov, V. V. (1997). The theory of activity and social practice. *Russian Studies in Philosophy*, 36, 57-69.
- Delpit, L. D. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Pedagogy and power in educating other people's children. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58, 280-298.
- Ellen, R. F. (Ed.). (1984). *Ethnographic research: A guide to general conduct*. London: Academic.
- Engestrom, Y. (1999). Activity theory and individual and social transformation. In Y. Engestrom, R. Miettinen, & R-L. Punamaki (Eds.), *Perspectives on activity theory* (pp. 19-38). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. London: Longman.
- Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. London: Routledge.
- Fiske, J. (1994). Audiencing: Cultural practice and cultural studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 189-198). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge and the discourse on language*. New York: Pantheon.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Language, counter-memory, practice: Selected essays and interviews*. (D. F. Bouchard & S. Simon, Trans.). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-77*. Brighton, Sussex: Harvester.
- Foucault, M. (1984). Truth and power. In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *The Foucault reader* (pp. 51-75). New York: Pantheon.
- Gee, J. P. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses* (2nd ed.). London: Falmer.
- Gee, J. P. (1999). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method*. London: Routledge.
- Gee, J. P. (2000/2001). Identity as an analytic lens for research in education. In W. G. Secada (Ed.), *Review of research in education* (Vol. 25, pp. 99-126). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- Gee, J. P. (2001, December). *Reading in "new times"*. Paper presented at the National Reading Conference, San Antonio, TX.
- Gutiérrez, K., & Larson, J. (1994). Language borders: Recitation as hegemonic discourse. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 3, 22-36.
- Hinton, S. E. (1967). *The outsiders*. New York: Puffin Books.
- Ingalls, R. (2005). *Containment in the writing classroom: A comparative study of writing identity in spoken-word performance and composition classroom spaces*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
- Kress, G. (2003, July). *Meaning, learning, and diversity*. Paper presented at the Tenth International Literacy and Education Research Network Conference on Learning, London.
- Lave, J. (1996). Teaching, as learning, in practice. *Mind, Culture, and Activity: An International Journal*, 3, 149-164.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Leont'ev, A. N. (1978). *Activity, consciousness, and personality* (Marie J. Hall, Trans.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. (Original work published 1977)
- Lewis, C. (2001). *Literacy practices as social acts: Power, status, and cultural norms in the classroom*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Lewis, C., & Ketter, J. (2004). Learning as social interaction: Interdiscursivity in a teacher-researcher study group. In R. Rogers (Ed.), *An introduction to critical discourse analysis in education* (pp. 117-146). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Moje, E. B. (2000). To be part of the story: The literacy practices of gangsta adolescents. *Teachers College Record*, 102, 652-690.
- Moje, E. B., & Ciechanowski, K. M. (2002, April). *Literacy, language, and life in the millennial world: A study of Latino/a youth literacy in one urban community*. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
- Moje, E. B., Ciechanowski, K. M., Kramer, K. E., Ellis, L. M., Carrillo, R., & Collazo, T. (2004). Working toward third space in content area literacy: An examination of everyday funds of knowledge and discourse. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 39, 38-71.
- Piaget, J. (1977). *The essential Piaget*. New York: Basic Books.
- Radway, J. (1984). *Reading the romance: Women, patriarchy and popular literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.