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Literacy Identity Work: Playing to Learn with Popular Media

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Hi, Alison,

I bought my first zine today! Actually, I had a bag full of zines ($48.44 worth, to be exact) by the time I left Bizarro-Wuxtry Comics in downtown Athens. You might say I got a bit carried away. But I've been interested in checking out zine culture for some time now. Several kids I know locally write zines, and Michele Knobel's recent talk [Knobel & Lankshear, 2001] on zines at the University of Georgia piqued my interest even further.

Truth is, I've been thinking about zines and other forms of popular culture a lot this week—largely due to a question directed my way as I worked with some colleagues on a grant proposal to study adolescents' literacy practices as they engage with popular media. The question had to do with frivolity. Did I think the reviewers of our proposal would dismiss it as being too frivolous? After all, my friends noted, there are teenagers who can't read, and we're proposing to study youth's fascination with zines, comics, videos, CDs, instant messaging, and the like. The question gave me pause, but then I remembered Robert (self-selected *pseudonym) from our media club study. Do you recall how he struggled to read in school and yet seemed to have so little difficulty reading text from the* Dragon Ball Z *series on the computer screen? What do you make of that?*

Donna

March 23, 2001

Hi Donna,

Yes I do remember Robert's engagement with Dragon Ball Z*. In fact, I remember sitting with him on a few occasions as he read web sites related to this Japanese animé. I was impressed with the amount of text he needed to read in order to get updates on recent episodes (he watched all of them, but still found pleasure in reading the commentary and summary about the episodes). Particularly interesting to me was the complexity of the texts he was reading on the web sites. They were rich with tough vocabulary words and resembled stories of Greek mythology (as a former English teacher I am apt to notice these things!).*

I didn't find Robert's interest in Dragon Ball Z *frivolous at all. In fact, watching him transact with the web sites he regularly visited gave me the impression that Robert was an intelligent, analytical young man who enjoyed and engaged complexity. Watching him also made me think how, as an English teacher, I would include his interest in* Dragon Ball Z *in my curriculum. What I have learned most from observing kids outside of school settings is how important it is to explore their interests, not superficially so as to make immediate ties to* *more "important" work (e.g., the study of Greek mythology) but, rather, to investigate them in their own right. Alison*

A Playful Reading of Dragon Ball Z

Robert is an adolescent we met at the public library while doing a research project on young people's transactions with popular culture**.** At the time we knew him, he was in 9th grade and attending a local public high school. He described himself as disinterested in reading, yet we often found him sitting at a computer in the young adult section, using the Internet to read about the Japanese animé, Dragon Ball Z. This particular animé has been made into approximately 13 movies and a television series shown on the Cartoon Network. Video games based on the anime are also available. The web sites that Robert frequented contained color animation cells from the television series and elaborate texts summarizing episodes, describing characters, and offering commentary on the series' complicated plot(s). Robert also engaged us in conversations about what he was reading, including detailed information on Toriyama Akira, DBZ's creator, and about his anticipation of getting to play the yet-to-be-released video game version of the series. Moreover, he often sat at the computer with a good friend, Chipmunk (self-selected pseudonym), and the two of them looked at and discussed the web sites together.

Robert's need to seek out others with whom he could share his interest in Dragon Ball Z reminds us of Gee's (in press) work on the "Affinity-Identity" concept. Gee explains that Affinity-Identity is formed through experiences that are shared within the practices of "affinity groups". Members of such groups participate in constructing and conveying "who they are" through sets of distinctive shared experiences. For example, avid followers of the television show Star Trek, often referred to as "trekkies", trade memorabilia and attend Star Trek conventions with other avid followers. It is through their affiliation with fellow fans that they project a particular identity.

Certainly language is one of, if not the most predominant, social practices used by affinity groups. If affinity groups use the Internet to communicate, for example, reading and writing become a vital part of their shared practices and experiences. Adolescents, such as Robert, who seek affiliation might very well use literacy as an important tool in pursuing shared interests. Indeed, as we have discovered in our personal quests to learn more about Dragon Ball Z, several chat rooms are available to fans of the Japanese animé. Postings include analyses of character development and debates over which fans are "real" and which ones are "haters' (those who are dismissed as being untrue fans because of their open criticism of particular characters or plot lines). Some chat participants include favorite quotes from the characters in their postings. Others recommend links to additional DBZ web sites—a practice that is meant to guide participants who appear to be ignorant of some aspect of the animé's development. Still others comment on past episodes and offer their predictions about how the series will proceed. As well, the chat room exchanges we experienced required us to analyze characters' motives, to differentiate among genres, and to trace shifts in our own identities—to alter our sense of who we thought we were in relation to other participants in the group.

Although we never witnessed Robert or Chipmunk enter a Dragon Ball Z chat room, we were privy to several conversations and brief exchanges they had as they sat in front of the computer screen analyzing DBZ characters, making predictions about the plot, kidding each other when one of them conveyed ignorance (usually it was Robert who chided Chipmunk), and pursuing multiple sources of information about the animé. Literacy practices of this kind clearly mimic those that language arts teachers try to foster in their students. The overarching plot of Dragon Ball Z is epic in nature—characters are engaged in difficult quests, and, thus, a web of subplots has evolved. To follow the subplots, it is necessary to acquire a detailed knowledge of the characters and their development. We saw in these exchanges, and still do, not just recreational or "frivolous" literacy practices, but ones that involve strategic thinking and learning.

Admittedly, our first impulse in discovering the ties between Dragon Ball Z and several elements from literature studies was to invite Robert to compare the Japanese animé to Greek myths and other forms of "high-literature." We did so briefly, but did not pursue the impulse very far. It seemed to take away from the purposeful play that appeared to draw Robert to Dragon Ball Z in the first place. That is, when we interjected our suggestions that the animé possessed many similarities to Star Wars and Greek myths, Robert politely humored us, but showed no enthusiasm for investigating the matter any further. In fact, when Alison asked him if he had enjoyed studying Greek mythology in school, his only response was to tell her that it had been easy to get good scores on the tests. When engaged with DBZ, on the other hand, the reward came from the pleasure and challenge of play, not from high test scores or adult praise.

Play: A Productive Form of Learning

A growing realization is that everyone—young children, adolescents, and adults—are experiencing fewer opportunities for play these days. Adults, in ever greater numbers, are choosing to work out of their homes, with the consequence being undifferentiated spaces for work and play. More parents are placing more youngsters in more structured after-school programs than ever before, and schools themselves are becoming workplaces where fun is frowned upon, especially if it interferes with back-to-basics teaching methods "guaranteed" to raise test scores. The notion of play is under full frontal attack by certain segments of society, according to Tapscott (1998), author of a best-selling book on the rise of the Net-generation.

Yet, in the midst of this feverish activity to raise the bar and institute high stakes testing at national, state, and local levels, researchers from all walks of life are reminding us that we have underestimated the productive nature of play. For instance, John Seely Brown, chief research scientist at Xerox Corporation (cited in Tapscott, 1998) argues that play enables the kind of free-form thinking needed in today's highly technical world. To his way of thinking, new information communication technologies are tapping into an inner source of creative power and opening up the kid in each of us.

By underestimating the power of play, we tend to overlook other forces at work in the world that are shaping how we think about free time. Unlike those who would argue that as a society we are opting for work rather than play, there are others who point out that with the passing of the Industrial Age, we have entered into a new era of cultural capitalism (Rifkin, 2000). This passage is marked by an ethos of work slowly giving way to an ethos of play. It is an era in which access to play is becoming more and more a matter of who has the time and money to pay for it in all its many forms. But beyond the critique of the commodification of play lies a material world filled with opportunities for kids such as Robert and Chipmunk. They, like tens of thousands of other youth around the globe, are bunching up at computers wedged into library study carrels (long since converted to computer stations) for the purpose of playing interactive games and reading texts, such as Dragon Ball Z.

But is this "really" reading, some might ask. We believe it is. Although Robert's reading of the text episodes that accompany (and we might add, outnumber) the cartoon-like images in

Dragon Ball Z is punctuated with playfulness, it is nonetheless a meaning making practice. By definition, reading/comprehension is a meaning making process involving both print and nonprint texts. It is a process that no one to our knowledge has labeled as pertaining only to the "serious" student (at least not yet). Of course, "serious" is one of those mischievous terms that can be challenged simply by asking the question, serious in whose eyes and by what standards? We would maintain that Robert (and Chipmunk, though perhaps to a lesser extent) were dead serious about their interest in reading the serialized episodes of Dragon Ball Z. We would even go so far as to claim that for Robert, at least, Dragon Ball Z served him well in the identity work he accomplished as a reader outside of school.

Literacy Identity Work

Each of us, the world over, has perceptions of ourselves that may or may not be consistent with how others in various social groups view us. In our case, this became evident as we prepared to enter our first Dragon Ball Z chat room. We worried that we would be found out instantly. Would others in the chat room see us for what we were—posers? We discussed at length our hesitancy to enter this different world of reading. In the end, it came close to being a "I dare, if you dare" proposition. As avid readers, we never experience such tentativeness when someone invites us into a new book club, not even when the book represents a new genre.

We share this story because we would wager that Robert experiences similar self-doubts when embarking upon reading tasks associated with formal schooling. Although the setting may not be new, nor the task, novel, he may experience the same sense of trepidation at being "found out" once again for coming up short on someone's standards for "real" reading. Labeled for some time now by his school as being "at risk" of dropping out of school due to low reading achievement, Robert has managed to stay the course. In fact, as we write, he is enrolled in the last 10-week marking period of his sophomore year. Small steps toward what some in his school would term doubtful progress? Maybe.

On the other hand, it could be argued that Robert has a fairly positive sense of himself as a reader. What counts as reading from his perspective may well be the enjoyment he derives from following the Dragon Ball Z saga and other genre similar to it. Although we never observed Robert reading anything other than DBZ-related material on the days we met with him in the library, it is quite possible that his interests extended beyond this one animé. Regardless, we can say with certainty that he was an expert on every facet of the saga and on Akira's life. He never missed an opportunity to point out why he believed Akira's decision to cease writing episodes for the series was a mistake.

In part, it was Robert's expertise and never flagging interest in Dragon Ball Z that earned him the respect of others in his peer group. Maintaining this position as the DBZ expert in the young adult section of the library was part of Robert's identity work. It required that he adopt and affiliate with multiple ways of "being" and "doing" the interpreter's role (Gee, 1996), especially during times when new episodes were released. Robert's interest never flagged, partly we suspect due to the allegiances he managed to forge with others in his peer group. As Cynthia Lewis's (1998) research on adolescents' interests in rock `n' roll and horror stories has demonstrated,

> The popular culture of young people is not about individual voices and identities. At the local level, in classrooms and communities, popular culture is related to social and cultural group identities, allegiances, and exclusions. At the global level,

> popular culture is even more removed from the individual expressions of voice and identity since it is produced largely through multinational corporations and disseminated across a wide range of audiences and geographies. (p. 118)

Lewis's (1998) work points out the paradox of "free choice" in terms of the Dragon Ball Z texts Robert chose to read and use in his identity work outside of school. Clearly, "free choice" is a misnomer if one considers the economic investments made by corporations in Japan, the United States, and elsewhere in their effort to distribute the animated series to audiences comprised of the Roberts of the world. But series distribution is only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. A glance at what is touted as the homepage of the official Dragon Ball Z web site, www.dragonballz.com, illustrates Lewis's point nicely. Four colorfully illustrated dragon balls are links, which when activated lead to sites that offer a variety of DBZ paraphernalia for sale, including beach towels, key chains, jewelry, action figures, school supplies, and the like. For the serious fan there is a link titled "Coming Soon," which promises to provide "Super Squeezable Squeezies" (a product of ALPI International) in the image of 3 popular DBZ characters: Vegeta, Super Saiyan Goku, and Piccolo.

In targeting Robert and other youth as potential consumers of these products, the corporate interests of multinational firms appear to offer teachers the perfect opportunity for incorporating students' interests in popular culture while simultaneously developing their critical awareness of mass marketing strategies—a sure-fire way to produce critical readers—or so we once thought. We are more cautious these days, largely as a result of having read Luke (1997) and others who point to the necessity of considering kids' pleasures when teaching them to do oppositional, or critical, readings of their favorite popular culture texts.

Learning from Play While Safe-Guarding Pleasures

If one of Robert's teachers were to use Dragon Ball Z to develop his critical awareness and competency as a reader, it would be important to keep in mind the meaning such material has for him. As pointed out earlier, we observed Robert engaging in complex literacy practices and in a fair amount of identity work as he sought to maintain an enviable position—that of DBZ expert in the library's young adult section. We also alluded earlier to the value of play and to its productive nature, particularly in today's high-tech world where playful constructions of text are thought to trigger some of our most imaginative capacities. Thus, we appreciate Robert's interest in Dragon Ball Z and the pleasures he derived from reading this serialized animé.

Recognizing adolescents' interests in texts such as DBZ only begins to address the challenge of how to incorporate youth's pleasures with popular media into classroom curricula, however. When teachers attempt to situate popular media texts alongside the more traditional texts of classrooms, they run the risk of burying youth's pleasures by exposing them to adult critique (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Luke, 1997). Finders (2000) found, for example, that her own uneasiness with the sexuality expressed in some popular media texts kept her from engaging in conversations with a group of middle school students. Although she had invited the students to bring in popular media texts that they enjoyed, and had intended to discuss the tough issues such texts might bring to the surface, she found herself judging the texts harshly and attempting to silence discussions she found unfavorable. She suggests that if she had used her discomfort as a topic of conversation with the students rather than as a means to quash their comments, a more open-ended analysis of their pleasures may have ensued.

Critical media pedagogy calls for both the expression of and examination of multiple points of view. However, rather than forcing students to take up others' beliefs about what is "true" or "correct," teachers guide them through a process of learning how to question their own pleasures. In the case of Robert, a teacher might ask him to share his knowledge and interest in Dragon Ball Z by engaging him in a discussion of how the animé works to invite and produce particular views. For example, Robert might examine how the animator visually portrays the characters in ways that convey traits of altruism and treachery. The good and evil dichotomy is especially interesting with regard to DBZ because many of the characters change position (from hero to villain), revert to their original position, or appear to operate from both positions at the same time. Robert might also critically examine how masculinity and femininity are portrayed in the animé.

Although teachers may discover newer and "better" ways to include popular media texts in classroom activities, such inclusion may not be desirable. It is often the case that by using popular media texts as topics of academic discussion we destroy the pleasures youth take in such texts (O'Brien, 1998). Moreover, it is unlikely that teachers can ever recreate the contexts that facilitate students' discussions and other transactions with popular media texts that occur outside or despite the "regular" curriculum.

What, then, is the place of popular media in schooling? Mahiri (2000) contends that teachers need to become aware of the connections between youth's engagement with popular culture and their need to form personal identifications, to construct meaning, and to pursue their own interests. Having developed this awareness, teachers may be better equipped to connect the work students do in school to their literacy practices outside of school. Building on Mahiri's work, we can see the need for such awareness, however, to go beyond mere appreciation. To our way of thinking, play, especially as it relates to popular media texts, is a concept that is worthy of further pedagogical exploration, if for no other reason than to ensure that it enters into conversations about classroom teaching and learning. By considering the value of playing to learn (Gee, in press), teachers may come to appreciate the attraction popular media texts hold for youth, and in doing so, they may discover ways to foster academic endeavors that invite the types of literacy practices adolescents find most worthwhile. Thus, it is the ways of making meaning that adolescents prefer rather than the specific kinds of texts they engage that we wish to highlight here.

In sum, we believe that learning more about what draws adolescents to particular texts and practices can help teachers to facilitate literacy events that are meaningful to students. As Robert's engagement with DBZ illustrates, what might be easily dismissed as "frivolous" actually involves multiple literacies embedded in complex communication practices. By allowing youth's ways of constructing meaning and identity to inform academic practices, play becomes a fruitful endeavor both in and outside of classrooms.

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