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Ned and Kevin: An Online Discussion that Challenges the "Not-Yet Adult" Cultural Model

Donna E. Alvermann, Ph.D.
University of Georgia

This is a case study of an ongoing e-mail discussion between an 8th-grade student named Ned and a graduate research assistant named Kevin. Both were of African American heritage and both expressed an abiding interest in a local, socially conscious rap group that became the focal point of their online interactions. It was through being privy to these exchanges and working closely for a semester with Ned and Kevin, who were participants in a study of youth culture and after-school literacy practices, that I began to question the very notion of youth as a subculture.

Adolescence and *adolescents* are no longer the transparent or stable terms they once were thought to be in some corners of the academic world. These signifiers are currently undergoing considerable scrutiny (Lesko, 2001: Vadeboncoeur & Stevens, 2004) as researchers, theorists, and practitioners alike explore ways of seeing and talking about young people that move beyond the dominant discourses of youth. In fact, contemporary research on young people's multiple literacies complicates the very notion of *adolescence*—a term Appleman (2001) once critiqued as a status category, or "a kind of purgatory between childhood and adulthood" (p. 1). This research on youth literacies, whether in edited volumes (Alvermann, 2002; Lankshear and Knobel, 2003; Sefton-Green, 1998; Vadeboncoeur and Stevens, 2004) or in refereed journals (Chandler-Olcott and Mahar, 2003; Guzzetti and Gamboa, 2004; Hagood, 2000; Moje, 2000), disrupts certain assumptions about what counts (or should count) as valued literacy practices

among people of all ages, while not falling prey to an overly simplistic celebration of youth culture.

Beyond Youth as a Subculture

In this chapter I draw from a theory of youth culture (Amit-Talai and Wulff, 1995) that is critical of the notion that adolescents are incomplete adults. Rather than view young people as "not-yet" or incomplete adults and thus less competent and less knowledgeable than their elders—a view held by some scholars (e.g., Coleman, 1961; Forcey & Harris, 1999; Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Parsons, 1942/1964) who conceptualize youth as a subculture structured by age and sex roles—I prefer, like Amit-Talai and Wulff (1995), to think of youth not as separate from the adult world but as "knowing something else that has to do with their particular situation and surroundings" (p. 11). This situated perspective on youth culture argues for literacy practices that avoid categorizing people in ways which divide us (the adults) from them (the youth). It also argues for exploring how all of us (adults and youth alike) act provisionally at particular times given particular circumstances and within particular discourses (Morgan, 1997).

It is not my intention to imply that subculture theory, the dominant paradigm of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, England since the 1970s, is without merit. Quite the contrary, for as Tait (2000) has pointed out, subculture theory offered a conceptual advancement over the Chicago School's delinquency model of the 1930s and the reductionist theories of Marxist ideology. A problem inherent in a subculture theory of youth is, according to Tait, the "unitary understanding of power that translates its exercise solely in terms of social control" (204). That is, when we conceptualize power as social control, we have no recourse but to view youth as dominated and repressed. In rejecting this view and arguing for a reinterpretation of power—one in which power is productive, resides in relations that are

changeable, reversible and unstable, and is dispersed through discourses—Tait aligns his thinking with Foucault (1988) most notably.

For example, in choosing to work within the New Literacy Studies (NLS) framework, I recognize that meanings associated with reading and writing vary across cultural time and space and take root in social practices that involve relationships of power (Kress and Street, this volume; Lankshear and Knobel, 2003). Taking the NLS perspective into account, along with the multiple and complex ways that adolescent and adult discourses interanimate each other, I attempt in this case study to demonstrate through the use of analytic tools such as cultural models, social languages, situated meanings, and Discourses (Gee, 1999; 2004) how age categorization is achieved. Specifically, I am interested in how findings from a larger semester-long, online discussion study worked to challenge the "not-yet adult" cultural model highlighted in this particular case.

The Larger Online Study

The purpose of the larger study (Alvermann, Hagood, Heron, Hughes, Williams, & Yoon, 2002) from which this case is drawn was to explore how youth who struggled when reading school-assigned textbooks approached tasks that required them to do critical readings of popular culture texts of their own choosing (e.g., magazines, comics, TV, video games, music CDs, graffiti, e-mail, and other Internet-mediated texts) during an after-school media club. Along with two graduate research assistants (Margaret Hagood and Alison Heron), I met weekly for 1 _ hours after school in a public library with each of three different groups of students in grades 6-9 for an entire semester (14 weeks); two additional graduate students (Preston Hughes and Kevin Williams) assisted in transcribing and interpreting the videotaped club meetings; the remaining graduate student (Jun Yoon) assisted in data management.

Data sources for the case study included the following: transcripts of my initial and follow-up interviews with Ned, his mother, and the librarian in charge of the young adult section of the library; Ned's daily after-school literacy log, which he kept 7 days a week for 14 weeks; three videotapes of Ned's participation in club meetings; printed copies of Ned's e-mail interactions with Kevin; and my field notes. For the purpose of focusing on a discourse analysis of Ned's and Kevin's online interactions, I used only two of the data sources just described, namely, the printed copies of their email discussions and my field notes.

Participants and Their Music

Ned, a 14-year-old African American boy, was in the eighth grade when I first met him. According to school records, he had scored in the lowest quartile on the district's standardized reading test. Less academically inclined than his mother would have liked, Ned's daily effort in core classes were sufficient for making him eligible to play on his middle school's football team. Ned was popular among his peers and a valued running back, but when his grades began to drop toward the end of the semester, he was cut from the team. From my first interview with Ned, it was clear that he had a passion for sports and envisioned himself going on to play college football.

Ned loved rap music. A self-styled rapper, Ned had formed his own rap group and had created a home page for it on the Web, which he named the M-L-P Boyz (Major League Player Boys). The group consisted of Man (aka Ned), L'il Thug, Tron, and G-money. Together, they composed raps that they subsequently committed to memory and performed for special occasions. But Ned's major interest in rap centered on a group from Atlanta, Georgia, known as the *Goodie MOb*, an acronym for "The Good Die Mostly Over Bull," whose members include Big Gipp, Khujo, T-Mo, and Cee-lo. The Atlanta group's first album, *"Soul Food"* (1995),

stands as one of the earliest Southern rap albums to emerge on a major label. Besides being pioneering, Soul Food also distinguished itself by addressing serious social issues.

Kevin Williams, currently a doctoral student in the Department of Social Foundations at the University of Georgia, was one of five research assistants who worked with me on the media club study. Early in the study, Kevin learned of Ned's interest in doing a project on the *Goodie MOb*. Quite coincidentally, Kevin had been a high school classmate of Big Gipp, Khujo, and T-Mo, and so he volunteered to help Ned learn more about the group. As a high school student in the late1980s, Kevin had listened to *Public Enemy*, a rap group whose political views and critical lyrics were similar to those of the *Goodie MOb*. After graduating from Benjamin E. Mays High School, a predominantly Black urban school in Southwest Atlanta, Kevin went on to graduate from Florida A & M with a B.S. in Criminal Justice. Still later, he graduated with a Master's in Public Health (M.P.H.) from Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta.

Method of Discourse Analysis

For the purpose of this chapter, I used Gee's (1999) method of discourse analysis. Its central premise is that "whenever we speak or write, we always and simultaneously construct or build six things or six areas of 'reality'" (p. 12). The six building activities (and some of their 18 corresponding questions) consist of *semiotic building* (e.g., what social languages are relevant and irrelevant), *world building* (e.g., what Discourses are being re/produced), *activity building* (e.g., what actions are going on), *socioculturally-situated identity and relationship building* (e.g., what roles, positions and their accompanying knowledges, beliefs, feelings, values are relevant or irrelevant to a given situation), *political building* (e.g., what status, power, and identities are relevant or irrelevant), and *connection building* (e.g., what sorts of connections—looking to the past and/or future—are made to other people, things, ideas, institutions, and Discourses).

In this chapter, I use these six building activities and their associated questions in conjunction with the four primary tools of inquiry (thinking-devices) that Gee (2004) recommends: social languages, situated meanings, cultural models, and Discourses. As thinking-devices, all four of these tools enabled me to analyze a nine-stanza account of Ned's and Kevin's online interactions, but it was cultural models that helped me think most pointedly about youth culture in relation to the adult world. Thus, the last section of the chapter is largely centered on a discussion of the data that used cultural models as an analytic tool.

Gee's (1999) guidelines for discourse analysis are just that: he is very clear in his writing on the topic that there are no "rules" to be followed "step-by-step" (Gee, 1996: 96). He does, however, encourage those who use his method to apply the tools of inquiry discussed above to address particular themes or issues present in a given data set. Toward that end, I selected a 750-word excerpt from Ned's and Kevin's online interactions around the *Goodie MOb* that was representative of the data from the larger 14-week media club study. Working within that excerpt, I selected several key words and phrases and asked what situated meanings they presented, especially given what I knew about the larger context in which they occurred. As I thought about certain situated meanings, I looked for linguistic details (e.g., "I-statements" and patterned repetitions) that seemed important, and for evidence of socially-situated identities that were both enacted and recognized by the participants. To engage more deeply with the data, I asked myself several of the 18 questions alluded to earlier, and of course, I jotted down questions of my own as they came up. Guided by my initial question (how did Ned and Kevin's online interactions work to challenge the "not-yet-adult" cultural model), I continued to use the four analytic tools as a means of illuminating the final points I wanted to make in relation to that

question. The process was one of many starts and half-finishes, followed by more revisions to my thinking, and then a "final" analysis.

To represent this analytic process, I used several of the transcription conventions that Gee (1999) recommends. For example, I numbered the lines of the printed version of the online conversation between Ned and Kevin (broken down into idea units) and underlined words that represented salient pieces of information in relation to the larger themes or issues they addressed. Then, I organized the lines into nine stanzas for the purpose of connecting relevant pieces of information. The nine stanzas in their entirety revealed both the macrostructure (large pieces of information set off by Roman numerals and labeled in bold, uppercase letters) and microstructure (numbered lines within stanzas) of the excerpted piece. These summaries will provide points of reference and context in the section on findings.

I. Making and Accommodating a Request

Stanza 1 (Ned introduces himself to Kevin, declares his allegiance to a well-known local rap group, the *Goodie MOb*, and requests that Kevin help him with a self-chosen media club project about the group.)

Stanza 2 (Kevin signals his willingness to accommodate Ned's request and offers some background on his personal knowledge of the *Goodie MOb*, whom he refers to as his "home boys." Specifically, Kevin attended high school with members of the group and counted Khujo as his closest friend.)

II. Reciprocating and Showing Appreciation

Stanza 3 (Ned provides two Web sites on the *Goodie MOb* that he thinks Kevin might find interesting.)

Stanza 4 (Kevin acknowledges his appreciation of the Web sites that Ned recommended and offers to answer questions about T-Mo, whom he assumes is one of Ned's favorite members of the *Goodie MOb* group.)

III. Disagreeing

Stanza 5 (Ned politely requests information on C-loe, not T-Mo, and he gives reasons for preferring C-loe's style of rapping.)

IV. Researching

Stanza 6 (Kevin gives Ned an assignment: “Look at the cover and credits of *Goodie MOb*’s first album and find the names of the people in their dedication.”)

Stanza 7 (Ned responds and asks if Brandon Williams, one of the people mentioned in the dedication, is related to Kevin.)

V. Giving Feedback and Taking Leave

Stanza 8 (Kevin acknowledges that Ned is correct in assuming that Brandon Williams was related to him; in fact, it was his brother. Kevin then describes how both Brandon’s death and the death of Barak Martin, a friend, were the result of two separate drive-by shootings that inspired some of the *Goodie MOb*’s songs, such as “Pall Bearers.” After giving Ned one more question to research—namely, finding out who received a treasured shot-out from the *Goodie MOb* in their album “Soul Food”—Kevin suggests that they continue to correspond after the media club study ends.)

Stanza 9 (Ned discovers that Kevin received the “shot-out.” He thanks Kevin for sharing a personal story about the *Goodie MOb* and says that he, too, would like to keep in touch after the study ends.)

Findings

This section of the chapter is divided into four subsections: social languages, situated meanings, cultural models and Discourses. It is my hope that each subsection provides sufficient data from the case study of Ned’s and Kevin’s online discussion for passing judgment on the usefulness of discourse analysis as a means of exploring the validity of the “not-yet adult” cultural model.

Social Languages

My approach to social languages in this chapter is to define them as Gee (2004) has done; that is, they are ways of using language in order to enact particular socially situated identities. Of course, as Gee has cautioned, this definition,

> in no way [implies] that enacting and recognizing *kinds of people*...is a matter of people falling into rigid kinds. Enacting and recognizing kinds of people is all about negotiating, guessing, and revising guesses about kinds of people; it is all

> about contesting and resisting being positioned as a certain kind of person. Thus, there are often no strict boundaries to social languages.(Gee, 2004: 42, emphases included in the original).

To illustrate how Ned used social language to enact his identity in relation to Kevin (at least as situated within their discussion of *Goodie MOb*), consider the following two excerpts from Stanzas 1 and 3:

Stanza 1 (Ned)
1a My favorite rap group is *Goodie Mob*
1b because they talk about life
1c and the sciety in there neighbor[hood]
2a Like for instance
2b the song I think should describe them
2c is Sky High
2d because that's like a fact in life
3a If you would listing to their songs
3b you would know that they rap
3c from the hart

Stanza 3 (Ned)
2a I found two good websites
2b about goodie mob
2c you might want to know about

In both stanzas, Ned makes repeated references to himself ("my," "I") as an informed knower who is fully competent to discuss the *Goodie MOb*'s place in the world of rap. Ned's two references to knowing as much, if not more, than Kevin can be found in lines 3a – 3c in Stanza 1 and in lines 2a – 2c in Stanza 3. The absence of any mitigating talk on Ned's part, such as "I don't know" or "It seems to me," suggests even further that Ned did not position himself as Kevin's subordinate, at least not when it came to interacting online about a rap group they shared in common.

In fact, it might be argued that if either of the two e-mailers expressed deferential language, it was Kevin (the adult) when he wrote in Stanza 4 (lines 4a – 7b) that he'd be willing to "try" to answer any questions Ned might have about T-Mo. In the same way, Kevin's use of

the phrase “If you would like” (line 6b in Stanza 4) suggests that he does not presume to know a lot about his younger e-mail partner’s likes and dislikes regarding the individual members of the *Goodie MOb* group. Even when Kevin could have situated himself as the adult and thus more competent and more knowledgeable about *Goodie MOb*’s first album, “Soul Food,” he did not. Instead, his statement in Stanza 6 (“By the way, the first album was “Soul Food” which I know you probably know”) suggests that Kevin was well aware of, and respected, Ned’s knowledge of the order in which the rap group’s releases had appeared.

Situated Meanings

As we just saw in the discussion of how social language is used to situate one’s identity in relation to someone else in a particular context, words do not have mere utterance-type meanings. As Gee (2004) explains it, “[words] also have meanings that are specific and situated in the actual contexts of their use” (Gee, 2004: 44). To illustrate how this is clearly the case in Ned’s and Kevin’s email correspondence, consider the following:

Stanza 1 (Ned)
1a My <u>favorite rap group</u> is *Goodie Mob*
1b because they <u>talk about life</u>
1c and <u>the society</u> in there neighbor[hood]

Stanza 2 (Kevin)
1a I hear you like my <u>home boys</u>
1b *Goodie MOb*!

In both of these exchanges, Ned and Kevin rely on each other’s shared knowledge (and perhaps experiences) of life, in particular U.S.urban neighborhoods. For example, in Stanza 1, Ned signaled Kevin that he knew *Goodie MOb* was known for its lyrics about society’s ills from the perspective of those who live in the neighborhoods known colloquially to the their residents as “the ‘hood’.” In responding to Ned’s e-mail, Kevin signaled that he not only understood Ned’s reference to *Goodie MOb*’s socially conscious raps, but that he also counted himself a part of the

urban scene depicted in the group's lyrics. Kevin identified his connection to the *Goodie MOb* in one word: "home boys." Although Kevin (as he explains later in Stanza 8) was no longer physically living in "the 'hood,'" he once did; thus, in referring to *Goodie MOb* as his "home boys," he seems to be communicating a sense of solidarity with the brothers. This interpretation seems warranted given that Kevin describes later in Stanza 8 how members of the *Goodie MOb* supported him and his family after his younger brother was shot and killed.

Not all situated meanings are of the kind just described. In the data from the larger study of Ned and Kevin's online discussion, the phrase "shot and killed" appears repeatedly in Kevin's description of the drive-by shootings at The Beautiful Restaurant in Southwest Atlanta in the early- to mid-1990s. Although this phrase contains words that have general meanings, the patterned sequence in which Kevin used them would suggest he wanted to communicate their special meaning in relation to the drive-by shooting deaths of first his best friend and then his brother in front of The Beautiful Restaurant. My hunch is that Ned interpreted the phrase's situated meaning, in all its graphic imagery, precisely as Kevin intended it.

Not words, but acronyms, the letters M.P.H. (standing for a Masters of Public Health degree) next to Kevin's name in Stanza 4 (line 8), and AKA=MAN next to Ned's name in Stanza 5 (line 5), signal a pair of situated meanings that are ambiguous at best.

Stanza 4
8 Kevin Pee-Wee Williams, M.P.H.

Stanza 5
5 Ned Bluffton, AKA=MAN

Considered in the larger context of the stanzas leading up to Stanza 8, there is evidence to suggest that Kevin got Ned's attention when he placed M.P.H. (signifying his Masters of Public Health degree) after his name for the first time in Stanza 4. Ned reciprocated in the very next stanza by signaling that he, Ned Bluffton, was also known as MAN (the name he used in the rap

group that he had formed and for which he had created a home page on the Web). Only this time, Ned had transformed “Man” (as it appeared on his home page) to “MAN”—not surprising, perhaps, given that M.P.H. has all uppercase letters. It is also interesting that Kevin’s nickname, PEE-WEE, which he introduced in his signature line in Stanza 2, didn’t evoke an earlier response from Ned. For reasons unknown, it was only after the appearance of M.P H. that Ned reciprocated in kind.

Also unknown is why Ned spelled *Goodie Mob* with a lowercase *o* in *Mob* whereas Kevin spelled *MOb* with an uppercase *O*. My own searches on the Web for the “correct spelling” of the rap group’s name proved futile, although I did not find it spelled the way Kevin spelled it on any of the sites I visited. When I asked Kevin about the “alternative” spelling, he looked puzzled and said that it was the spelling his home boys used. It is of interest here simply because *MOb* appears to have a situated meaning known only to individuals close to the group.

Cultural Models According to Gee (2004), “cultural models help people determine, often unconsciously, what counts as relevant and irrelevant in given situations” (p. 45). For example, they “explain” why words and images have the particular meanings that they do, and they “fuel their ability to grow more” (Gee, 1999: 81). Thus, in the previous section, it was a shared cultural model of what counts as relevant in the world of socially conscious rap that enabled Ned to declare his allegiance to the *Goodie MOb* “because they talk about life and the society in there neighbor[hood]” (Stanza 1, lines 1b – 1c). Similarly, Ned knew he was on firm footing when he observed that if Kevin listened to *Goodie MOb*, he would know that the members of the group rapped from their hearts (Stanza 2, lines 3a – 3c).

Citing the work of Hutchins (1995) and Shore (1996) on cognition, culture, and the problem of meaning, Gee (1999) enlarged upon the concept of shared cultural models when he wrote:

> Cultural models are usually not completely stored in any one person's head. Rather, they are distributed across the different sorts of "expertise" and viewpoints found in the group…, much like a plot to a story or pieces of a puzzle that different people have different bits of and which they can potentially share in order to mutually develop the "big picture." (Gee, 1999: 81).

That cultural models typically do not reside in any one person's consciousness (or unconsciousness) makes them an interesting analytic device. For example, a cultural model that seemed to be operating in the e-mail discussion between Ned and Kevin was that of how to do research for a school assignment. Although Ned choose on his own to research the *Goodie MOb* for his media club project—in fact, as my field notes show, it was Ned who devised the name "freedom activity" as a descriptor for the free-choice project—in the end, it appeared to be the cultural model of how to do school research that determined in part why Ned initially positioned himself as "student" to Kevin's "teacher," a position that Kevin readily took up:

Stanza 1 (Ned)
4 Because I'm doing a <u>project</u> on them
5a Could you give me
5b some kind of <u>facts about them</u>?

Stanza 2 (Kevin)
2 I will <u>help</u> you with your project
3a One <u>condition</u> is
3b that you <u>have to</u> e-mail me
3b and <u>keep me informed</u>.
4a Today I will <u>start</u> with a little basic information
4b about the <u>members</u> of the group
- -
9a The <u>next time</u> I write
9b I will <u>tell you a little more</u> about Khujo
9c in terms of when he <u>started rapping</u>

Later, in Stanza 8, after Ned had satisfactorily answered Kevin's question about the names of the people to whom the *Goodie MOb* had dedicated their first album, Kevin praised him for doing a good job. This pattern of question/answer/praise continued when still later, Kevin said, "Your last bit of homework is to look up which members of the group gave me a shot-out in their personal thank yous in the 'Soul Food' album." As these excerpts demonstrate, the cultural model of "doing a school assignment" instantiates the "not-yet" or "incomplete adult" cultural model to which I alluded earlier in the chapter. What is different in the online interactions between Ned and Kevin, however, is that the two cultural models—doing school research and viewing youth as "incomplete adults"—were not fully stored in either Ned's or Kevin's head. This is evident in the excerpts from Stanzas 3 and 4 that follow. Note, for example, a reversal of roles in terms of who found some relevant websites (Ned) and who benefited from them (Kevin); as well, who was invited to ask questions (Ned) and who said he'd try to answer them (Kevin):

Stanza 3 (Ned)
2a I found two good websites
2b about goodie mob
2c you might want to know about

Stanza 4 (Kevin)
1a I appreciate you
1b giving me the web sites.
2 I have enjoyed looking them up
- -
7a E-mail me some questions about him [T-Mo]
7b and I will try to answer them

Perhaps most telling of all was the fact that Ned did not act on Kevin's offer to ask any question that he (Ned) might have about T-Mo. Instead, Ned gave several good reasons why he preferred to know more about C-loe than T-Mo:

Stanza 5 (Ned)

2a I would like to know
2b more about c-loe
2c because I think
2d he knows how to rap better than the rest
3a I ain't trying to put the rest down
3b but I think
3c he has more charicteristics
3d in his raping style
4 His style is creative

This scenario, in terms of how it played out, is hardly a good fit with a cultural model that views young people as being less competent and less knowledgeable than their elders. Of note, too, in Stanza 5 (line 3a) Ned is careful to let Kevin know that he isn't trying to put down T-Mo and the rest of the group in terms of their rapping ability. This sign of maturity, again, is hardly representative of a person who is a "not-yet" adult.

Discourses Discourses are ways of speaking, writing, thinking, and behaving in the world. Each Discourse incorporates what Gee (1996) has referred to as "a usually taken for granted and tacit 'theory' of what counts as a 'normal' person and the 'right' way to think, feel, and behave" (Gee, 1996: ix). Unlike cultural models, which are storylines of how things work in the world, a Discourse is concerned with how a person enacts a certain sort of person (a socially situated identity) through interacting with other people. As Gee (2004) explained, "Discourses recruit specific social languages (ways with words) and cultural models (taken-for-granted stories), which in turn encourage people to construct certain sorts of situated meanings—that is, encourage them to read context in given ways" (Gee, 2004: 41). Thus, what a person says (or does) and what other people hear (or see) will vary greatly depending on the context in which such communication takes place. Even though the people involved may be speaking the same language, there is room for misinterpretation. Consider, for example, an excerpt from my field notes describing the day I brought a purchased copy of *Goodie MOb's* first album, "Soul Food," to the media club for Ned.

Shortly after 4:00 p.m., I arrived at the meeting room reserved for the media club's use in the left wing of the public library, a large modern building located adjacent to the middle school that Ned attended. As was typical, the majority of the club members had arrived early and had settled into their favorite activities. Bob, Seymour, and James were seated on the floor around a Nintendo game already in progress, which Ned, who had arrived after me, then joined…. Within 5 minutes of joining his friends, Ned looked up and hollered down to my end of the room: "Miss Donna, did you get *Goodie MOb*?" I had, but it had slipped my mind. When I produced a copy of "Soul Food" from my black canvas bag, Ned left his 3 buddies to finish the video game by themselves. He immediately opened the CD case, read off the list of raps on the back of the case, and put the CD to play in one of the two boom boxes nearby. With headphones on, he was soon engrossed in the group's music. I also noted that he was reading the printed insert that came with the CD as he listened to the group rap.

After some time had passed, Ned came over to where I was working with [another club member] and asked me if I wanted to listen to *Goodie MOb* with him. I said I did and followed him back to the CD player, where he proceeded to turn up the volume on "Soul Food," the song for which the album is named. Although I listened intently, I had trouble distinguishing one word from the next in some of the raps—a fact that didn't escape Ned's attention. Strategically, he reached over to the CD case, withdrew the insert containing the printed lyrics, and began running his finger under the lines of the rap that boomed out into the room. No one else looked up from what they were doing as Ned and I sat on the floor for a good 15 minutes listening to the various tracks on the *Goodie MOb*'s first album.

After listening to the track titled "Cell Therapy," I reached for my book bag to get out the most recent issue of *Blaze,* a magazine that I had purchased for its feature story on the *Goodie MOb*. When Ned showed no visible interest in reading the article, I asked him if he'd like me to read aloud the part on "Cell Therapy." He said he would, but after a couple of paragraphs I could tell he wasn't interested. His attention wandered, and he began to play with the CD case, opening and closing it for no apparent reason. I asked him if he'd rather I read about Cee-lo, his favorite of the rappers. He said he would. This time he remained engaged, following along as I read aloud, for about a page.

When it was time to switch activities so that those who had not had access to the computers in the young adult section of the library could take their turn, Ned headed to a computer with the CD in hand and e-mailed Kevin the names of the individuals who were listed on the insert's dedication page.

As illustrated in this excerpt from my field notes, Ned's enactments as reader and non-reader varied according to how he read the context. Initially eager to locate information on the CD jacket by himself (or to run his finger under the lines of print that I needed in order to

understand the rappers' lyrics), Ned enacted the competent reader. But when I introduced a magazine article on the story behind "Cell Therapy"—a new world order in which Blacks in the "hood" would be singled out, searched, and seized—Ned showed no visible interest in reading it. Almost immediately our Discourses of competent and incompetent reader recruited specific social languages and cultural models that enabled us to assume certain socially-situated identities and to act on those assumptions. For example, I read the context as one that required a competent reader, and Ned appeared to read it as one that required a passive listener, a socially-situated identity which he only partially enacted. We both constructed certain sorts of situated meanings around "Cell Theory" as a result of our clashing Discourses, but those constructions only served to highlight the interesting contrasts between a context that required competency in aurally comprehending texts (the CD lyrics as rapped by *Goodie MOb*) and a context that required competency in visually comprehending a printed article about one of *Goodie MOb*'s songs.

Discussion

In the field of literacy studies, issues of power are inseparable from the storylines (cultural models) that help us determine, often unconsciously, who we are in relation to other people with whom we wish to identify or be recognized by. Moreover, according to Gee (2004), "the situated meanings of words and phrases within specific social languages trigger specific cultural models in terms of which speakers (writers) and listeners (readers) give meaning to texts" (Gee, 2004: 45). For example, in one cultural model of youth culture—one that views youth as a subculture structured by age—adolescents are typically not accorded the "right" to give meaning to certain texts. That right, so to speak, is reserved for their elders, who are deemed in that particular cultural model to be more competent and more knowledgeable than youth.

However, in another cultural model of youth culture, often referred to as the situated perspective, young people are viewed as integral to the adult world and as knowing certain things that have to do with their particular situation and surroundings. This cultural model, in my estimation, seems a relatively good fit with the data just analyzed. But what warrants such a claim? More specifically, what did my analysis of Ned's and Kevin's semester-long, email discussion reveal that would suggest serious challenges to the "not-yet adult" view of youth culture?

Challenges to the "Not-Yet-Adult" Cultural Model

One challenge to this model can be observed in the way that Ned used social language to enact his identity in relation to Kevin. Rather than enact a subordinate position for himself in the conversation about *Goodie MOb*, Ned demonstrated in his initial e-mail to Kevin that he knew certain things that had to do with his particular situation and surroundings. He appeared to impress Kevin with his knowledge of the characteristics of socially-conscious rap, and later, with his choice of recommended Web sites on the *Goodie MOb* group. Early on, in an unsolicited e-mail sent just to me, Kevin corroborated my impression that Ned had presented himself well. In Kevin's words, "To have a person [Ned's] age be able to recognize the social relevance of a group like *Goodie MOb* shows that this young person has developed some very needed skills."

A second challenge to the cultural model that views youth as incomplete adults was noted in the way that both Ned and Kevin accorded relatively "equal" status to each other's e-mailed contributions. For example, Ned appreciated the personalized "behind-the-scenes" story of the *Goodie MOb* group, and Kevin appreciated Ned's recommended Web sites. Similarly, Ned appeared to have no qualms about contrasting C-loe's ability to rap with T-Mo's, and Kevin seemed not to be offended by Ned's assessment. In sum, neither participant appeared to pull

rank, so to speak, although it was evident from the sheer length of Kevin's e-mails that he dominated the conversation in terms of information shared.

A third challenge to the "not-yet-adult" view of youth culture can be seen in the way Ned and Kevin enacted their identities as "student" and "teacher" in relation to one another. Unlike what the "not-yet-adult" cultural model would predict, the two participants did not appear to let their age differences stand in the way of their shared interest in (and willingness to comment on) the *Goodie MOb*. Although Ned appeared to be the "needy" one in that he initially requested Kevin's help on the research project, it could be argued that to some degree, at least, Kevin was also needy: that is, he needed to share the story of his younger brother's death. Evidence that this could have been the case can be seen in Kevin's explicitly stated appreciation of Ned's steadfastness in tracking down who Brandon Williams was (and perhaps not so coincidentally, in his assigning Ned the task of finding out who received a highly treasured "shot-out" from the *Goodie MOb*). Then, too, both Ned and Kevin expressed a desire to keep in contact once the study had ended.

Not There Yet

Lest it be said that too much fuss is being made concerning possible challenges to the "not-yet-adult" cultural model, I do want to acknowledge that Ned's positioning himself as subordinated reader/being in my presence during our face-to-face discussion of "Cell Therapy" is not inconsequential. In that particular situation (and when given no opportunity to negotiate his way out of it), Ned resorted to "doing adolescence" in a Discourse that is quite congruent with an age-sensitive, youth-as-subculture model. Perhaps the lesson to be learned from this is that if models of youth culture are to change, much work needs to be done in the area of situated meanings, especially in relation to comprehending texts of all kinds (print, digital, symbolic, and

so on). For whether one's goal is to analyze a piece of data seemingly so small and insignificant as Ned's decision to add AKA=MAN after his name, or to tackle much larger issues, such as spatializing literacy research and practice (Leander and Sheehy, 2004), as a field we cannot ignore the power of situated meanings (negotiated or otherwise) to trigger specific cultural models of youth and their literacies.

That such models will differ for preschool children's engagement in home-based digital literacy practices (Marsh, this volume) and Ned's online discussions with Kevin in an after-school media club is inevitable. However, I would submit that how social language is used in these contexts to situate a young person's identity in relation to an adult's is not that dissimilar. Nor are the Discourses at work in the chapters by Stein and Slonimsky, and Janks and Comber (this volume) all that different from those operating in the present chapter. For while it might seem at first glance that primary-grade youngsters and their parents/teachers, working continents apart on school-related reading projects, provide quite a contrast to the after-school media club in which Ned was free to pursue his interest in a socially conscious rap group, the actual ways in which both younger and older people interacted to produce certain socially situated identities shared much in common. So much so, in fact, that in a few contexts it was difficult to separate student from teacher, young person from adult.

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