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CURRICULUM AS TRANSMITTER
OF SOCIOECONOMIC VALUES:
CASE STUDY OF A MIDDLE-SCHOOL
WRITING PROJECT

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Abstract

The social context of a sixth-grade writing project (a simulation game called "Right is Write") was analyzed to identify both its manifest and its hidden curricula and their relationships to the expectations and norms of society. Data sources included ethnographic field notes, videotapes, teacher interviews, and a student questionnaire. Findings suggest that participation in the simulation game shaped values through tacit acceptance of its behavioral rules and ascendant hierarchy of occupational roles (both of which determined unequal assets, privileges, and decision-making power), and contributed to legitimation of the inequalities built into capitalistic socioeconomic systems. Results of this study alert educators to the need to consider the hidden curricula associated with writing activities, and to evaluate whether or not such activities should be modified or reconstructed.

CURRICULUM AS TRANSMITTER OF SOCIOECONOMIC VALUES: CASE STUDY OF A MIDDLE SCHOOL WRITING PROJECT¹

June M. Martin²

This study describes and explains how teacher and students enacted one segment of a middle-school writing curriculum and how socioeconomic values were manifested and transmitted in the classroom.

Educational theorists suggest that values (e.g., related to ideologies of society and workplace) may be revealed in the interrelated processes of content selection, instruction, and evaluation (Bernstein, 1975; Eggleston, 1977). The boundaries of acceptance or the legitimacy of such values or ideologies may be indicated by the presence of certain conflicts or constraints to curriculum practice (Apple, 1975). In addition, certain theoretical and historical perspectives may shed light on how or why these values or ideologies are interrelated (Giroux, 1979).

What are some economic values of the workplace that school practices legitimate? Bowles and Gintis (1976), for example, suggest that the school system reproduces structures of privilege and economic inequality (e.g., hierarchical lines of authority, job fragmentation, and unequal rewards). Likewise, Carnoy (1974) indicates that schools attempt to convince students that such an economic system is logical and that roles allocated to them are (and will be) the right ones for them to play.

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Why investigate a writing occasion for transmission of values? Studies have shown that writing is linked to achievement of economic goals of both society and schools. These goals become values insofar as their pursuers regard the goals as important and their attainment worthy of effort and struggle. Goody, Cole, and Scribner (1977), in a study of the functions of writing among the Vai of North Africa, discovered that writing (record keeping) enabled the leader of the Vai to accumulate capital and to call upon the services of his neighbors. Reder and Green (Note 1), studying the functions of writing in an Alaskan fishing village, noted that use of writing in the domains of school and the public sector gradually influenced the local literacy of church and industry. Each domain assigned particular roles and socialization processes to their writing specialists, and the use of writing in each domain conveyed particular social meanings and value systems.

How do the social processes that take place in the classroom relate to those of the larger society? Florio (1979), in a study of writing in a second-grade classroom in Michigan, illustrates how students' letter writing to manufacturers was instrumental in helping them obtain items to sell in the marketplace of a microcosmic city in their classroom. Writing served both to help students organize their experiences and to give them access to the world outside.

A simulation game was chosen for analysis in preference to other writing occasions because in a simulation students would probably be more actively involved, thus their goals and values as well as those of the teacher would tend to be manifest. In addition, simulation games tend not only to reflect processes that take place in society, but research to date indicates that simulations teach values and attitudes more effectively than do other methods of instruction (Marsh, 1981).

For these reasons this investigation focuses on a writing occasion called

Right Is Write³, a simulation game played in a middle-school classroom. Sixth-grade students played roles of writers, agents, editors, and publishers, interacting to produce, evaluate, and buy and sell compositions intended for a predetermined audience.

After indicating situational context, data, and methods from which this study is derived, **Right Is Write** will be described, first, from the viewpoints of participants in the project--teacher, students, and participant observer, and then, a plausible case will be made to show specifically what socioeconomic values **Right Is Write** evidenced and how they were transmitted.

Background of Research Methods

The work reported is derived from a study of the acquisition of written literacy throughout one school year in a second/third grade and a sixth grade in two separate mid-Michigan schools. Entry to the sixth-grade site, at which **Right Is Write** took place, was negotiated with an experienced teacher of communication arts and social studies, Ms. Anderson.⁴ Ms. Anderson had hoped to complete the game in one 2½-hour session. But because of several time constraints, participants took two sessions to complete the whole-group enactment of the game and approximately four weeks for follow-up activities.

Types of data I collected included the following:

1. field notes gathered as two separate student classes enacted the simulation game,
2. videotapes of the simulation game (two days of project sessions) supplemented by audiotapes of small-group interchanges,
3. the teacher's journal entries about plans for and reflections on her writing curriculum,

³**Right Is Write** is available from Innovative Ventures, Inc., 429 Marbleridge Road, North Andover, Massachusetts.

⁴Names given to teacher and students are pseudonyms.

4. documentation of teacher interviews, and
5. samples of student writings and other classroom and school artifacts.

Procedures for Analysis

Questions developed to guide selection and analysis of data reflect the hypothesis that socioeconomic values are transmitted through content selection, distribution and enactment of roles, teacher and student evaluations, and constraints to the enactment of the game:

1. What information did the teacher select?
2. How did she distribute it?
3. What content did the students initiate or negotiate?
4. How did students evaluate processes and products of **Right Is Write**?
5. How did the teacher evaluate processes and products of **Right Is Write**?
6. What influences constrained the selection, enactment, and evaluation of the game?

Substantive concepts (e.g., rules, role behavior, evaluation, conflict) and logical devices (e.g., historical and analogical thinking processes, setting up polarities) were applied to facilitate processes of data analysis and reduction (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). Working hypotheses were tested by comparing observations of similar types of happenings and by triangulation or comparing results with other kinds of evidence (Gorden, 1969; McCutcheon, 1981). After considering alternative interpretations of both confirming and disconfirming evidence, propositions were modified or revised and conclusions synthesized.

Description of **Right Is Write**

Enactment of **Right Is Write** was a culminating activity that took place near the end of the school year. The teacher's explicit goals were to have all her students enjoy the writing activities and experience success in writing. In **Right**

Is Write students had opportunities to apply the technical writing skills of story composition they had practiced during the school year by acting out or exploring career roles they might choose or be selected for in the future.

Ms. Anderson herself selected the game for use with her students. She set the stage for enacting the simulation by rearranging classroom furnishings and assigning individuals to various roles and particular groups. In her journal (5/2/80) she wrote:

I preassigned roles for the students to play because some of the roles demand students with special skills (writing skills as well as people skills). Each game requires 2 publishers, 4 editors, 1 banker (teacher aide) and agents with 3-4 writers in their case. (I ended up with 5 agents--or 5 "writing groups.")

Before the participants enacted their roles, Ms. Anderson explained the objective of the game, its reward system, role expectations, how resources would be distributed, and time limitations. Then students enacted their roles: The writers wrote drafts of stories; the agents negotiated commissions with writers for stories sold to editors; the editors, in turn, sold the stories to publishers. During this process both editors and publishers read, edited, evaluated, and either accepted or gave reason for rejecting the written products. The teacher, as facilitator, answered individual questions, and, in her words, was "one who sees that the game operates the way it is supposed to." Although she preferred not to do so, Ms. Anderson entered into disputes as a mediator as well. The teacher's aide, acting as banker, distributed resources. After each of two large-group simulation sessions, a board of editors assigned points to stories purchased by publishers. Near the end of the second session, Ms. Anderson interviewed students individually about their role preferences in the event that the game could be played again. She later met with a small group of volunteers to tally winning scores (quality points per story: 0-7 low, 8-11 good, 12-16 high, 17-20 superior), and she initiated a written survey and a discussion with her classes to

gather information for use in possible further enactments of the game. Finally, she published and distributed the winning stories.

Directions for the Game

Ms. Anderson explained that the objective of the game was to write a quality product that a publisher would buy, one that teachers would use with fourth or fifth graders to teach both comprehension skills and vocabulary skills. Next, she designated the goals and criteria by which students would compete with each other in their respective roles. The two publishers would compete for the largest number of total points awarded by a board of editors to stories they would purchase. The four editors would be evaluated on how well they enacted their roles, including their job as members of the board of editors. Of the five agents, the winning agent would be the one who earned the most dollars. Of the 16 writers, the winner would be the one accorded the highest number of points for one story. Note that those in top echelon roles would have a proportionately greater opportunity to succeed when compared to the common writer. Thus, for example, one of the two publishers could be declared winner whereas only one of the 16 writers could be selected as winner.

In addition, distribution of assets was unequal. Publishers did not have the opportunity to earn any money, but were given the largest amount of capital. Publishers received \$5000; editors, \$250; agents, \$150; and writers, only \$100.

Those in upper echelon roles also received greater decision-making power. Editors and publishers had power to decide whether to accept or reject compositions written by others, and, if accepted, how much to pay for them. Editors and publishers also were to act in a supervisory capacity. Ms. Anderson suggested that they look over writers' shoulders as they worked so that stories wouldn't be completely new to them later on.

She assigned to agents a role much like that of a supervisor or a technician, the limited function of largely attending to the mechanics of a task (writing):

As the writers are writing the agent is there to help you with the spelling or if you want to know if you should have a new paragraph, or you have another question about punctuation or capitalization, that is what the agent is for. The agent is the expert in your group.

Ms. Anderson also told the writers that they could decide upon other formats--for example, non-fiction, an article, or an explanation--but she strongly suggested that they use story-starters (cards on which are written ideas and suggested vocabulary words for beginning and developing a story) for at least their first stories.

Enacting the Game

As students and teacher began to enact the game, three editors assumed privileges of being "out to lunch" or "out to breakfast." They wrote these messages on placards placed on their "office" tables. They then began their supervisory roles of overseeing what writers were doing and began to show off the monies they had received.

The two publishers soon began to rationalize and brag about the relatively large amounts of money they had received.

Publisher (Tim): You carry yours (money) with you?

Publisher (Marta): Mine's down there.

Writer: I'll carry your money for you, Marta.

Tim: Yeah.

Marta: You guys, we have this much money because we've
got to buy stories.

Agent (jokingly): I lost a \$100 bill.

Tim (licking a sucker (lollipop)): We could buy every story in this class for a hundred bucks and still have a lotta money left. (Agent sticks out her tongue at Tim, and writers continue with their efforts to write.)

Marta: What if we really had this much? I'd say good-bye and go. Pfft!

Tim: I had (started with) \$5000!

Marta: So did I.

Publishers made evident their power or status in other ways as well, for example, in their supervisory role.

Writers became vulnerable when they submitted their writings to someone in a position to evaluate them. In one case a writer begged a publisher not to read her story, and the publisher had to reassure the writer that she would protect the writer's reputation.

Writer (Karen): Oh, please don't read it (piece of writing).

Publisher (Marta): Why? I'm not gonna laugh at it. Really!
I'm not going to say anything to anybody else.

Karen (reluctantly): All right.

Editors and publishers assumed not only access to certain privileges, but also power to confer those privileges on others.

Writer (to editor): Do you have any more gum? (twice)

Editor (Don): It's his (points to Tim, publisher).

Writer: (to Tim) Do you have any more gum? (Tim shakes his head.)

Writer: Are you sure?

Editor (Don): You see. You're not an editor, so you don't have a piece of gum. (Don stands at table, flips pencil, chews gum.)

Agent (sarcastically): Only editors are allowed to have gum, right?

Publisher (Tim): Editors and agents . . . yeah, and one agent, right, and one writer. (Tim looks over to writer, who is already chewing gum.)

Agent (sarcastically): That helps a **lot**. I've got braces!

Students commented on assumed privileges and the unequal distribution of resources. For example, later in the game, one of the editors added a second message to a placard, and a neighboring agent responded to it.

Agent (Tara): (Calling to editor, Carol) Honestly, Carol, "out to lunch" and "in?" (as Carol sits back in her chair, examines her money)

And in response to student questions, Ms. Anderson rationalized that publishers had more money to spend because they had a large organization behind them, whereas editors had less money but stood to earn the most. Ms. Anderson also extended a privilege to editors beyond the confines of the simulation session. She excused them from a class the following week so that they could evaluate writings purchased by publishers.

In general, Ms. Anderson took many opportunities to reinforce game rules and did not allow students to deviate from them. For instance, Ms. Anderson checked with Tim (publisher) to see if he had made a proper entry for a story he had purchased. She told him that accurate record keeping was important. One writer wanted to submit the same (or similar) stories to different editors. Ms. Anderson said that his plan was unacceptable because publication by different publishers would violate the copyright law.

Some students experienced conflict when they did not measure up to their own expectations or role expectations of the game. One writer, for example, became frustrated because he was not making the progress he desired. (His goal was to complete four stories.) An editor cried because she had not yet purchased any stories. Ms. Anderson counseled her to be more aggressive--to search out and offer to purchase stories even before they were completed.

Ms. Anderson expressed some dissatisfaction with students' emphasis on money. She explained to the teacher aide that if students were to play the game more often, writing would become more important than money. She compared two editors, Sam, who was interested only in making money, and Don, whose goal was to purchase quality work as well.

At the end of the first game session, Ms. Anderson commended the students on their spirit of cooperation and announced that they would continue the game

the following Tuesday afternoon.

On that afternoon Ms. Anderson interviewed students about what roles they would choose if they played the game again. She soon commented on the large number of students who wanted to be publishers: "We have 10 people who'd like to be publishers and we only need two." Later she commented that there were few students who wanted to be writers.

(Field notes, 5/6/80) Ms. Anderson announces to students the results of her survey. She tells them that only four people want to be writers. Students respond that in the other positions they can earn more money and that it is harder to win the game by being a writer.

Ms. Anderson also announced that lessons were to be learned in economics (as well as in writing) but that she did not have time to deal with them. Perhaps students were already learning lessons in economics. One student suggested a modification of the unbalanced distribution of roles. Others saw money as problematic.

(Students are picking up envelopes of material used during the game. A small group of students talk with Ms. Anderson at the front of the room.)

Student: Are we going to do this again?

Ms. Anderson: I don't know. We'll have to see if we have time. . . . Possibly, we'll do it one more time.

Student: Okay.

Student: We going to do it the whole. . .

Agent: Yeah, have eight editors, four publishers.

Ms. Anderson: . . . be kinda hard to do the whole thing.

Student: (suggests playing the game, but skipping directions)

Ms. Anderson: We could, couldn't we? Now that you know the rules, I wouldn't have to explain it. It's a good idea.

(Teacher's journal, 5/16/80) I also had the kids fill out an evaluation form on **Right Is Write** and we discussed them in class. . . . In our discussion several kids mentioned that

money caused problems (1) they lost it; (2) their agents charged too high a commission; (3) the publishers didn't pay enough; (4) someone took their money, etc.

Discussion

What socioeconomic values may have been transmitted through **Right Is Write?** The major socioeconomic values resembled those of our capitalistic economy (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). The manifest or formal goal was that of producing a product--a quality piece of writing. It was to have certain marketable qualities or components (e.g., be attractive in appearance, have correct punctuation, have correct capitalization and paragraphing, have a challenging vocabulary, and be of interest to a prespecified consumer audience of fourth and fifth graders). Even as Ms. Anderson urged students to work competitively, she commended them for working cooperatively. She assigned students to different roles (division of labor) to collectively produce similar products. Upper echelon roles (publishers, editors, agents) were fewer, whereas workers (writers) were many. Ms. Anderson distributed the top echelon role (publisher) to students she deemed had people or leadership skills, and assigned middle management roles (editor, agent) to those she deemed able to assist others with basic skills, or the mechanics of writing. Although common writers had previous experience with their task, no prerequisites were specified.

(Interview, 4/28/80) Ms. Anderson is going to assign tasks because she believes it will work much better if she does. The agent is the key person and has to know punctuation, etc., very well and be an excellent writer. Editors evaluate the writing so they have to be reasonably competent in catching mistakes in others' writing, even if they don't write very well themselves. . . . Publishers need to be students whom others trust and get along well with. Good leadership quality is important, Ms. Anderson said. They have to be able to refuse work tactfully and not make people mad.

Those students in upper echelon roles both were assigned to and assumed certain privileges or status symbols. For example, publishers had a 50%

certain privileges or status symbols. For example, publishers had a 50% opportunity of becoming the number one winner in their category; editors, a 25% chance; agents, a 20% chance; and writers, only about 6%. The students in upper echelon roles flaunted and rationalized the relatively large amounts of capital they had received; the teacher rationalized their behavior. When enacting their roles, publishers and editors also exercised certain other options (privileges) that they attributed to their positions (e.g., chewing gum, being "out to lunch"). They also supervised and evaluated the products of the workers (writers).

As students enacted their roles, the goals or values aspects of the general game objective--that of producing a quality product--became personalized. For example, one editor aimed to earn as much money as possible with little concern about quality, whereas another editor was concerned about both; another editor was in tears because, at the end of one simulation session, she had not yet purchased or sold any stories; and one writer was frustrated because he did not achieve his goal of writing four complete stories. Thus students manifested socioeconomic values including those of earning money, becoming an effective salesperson, and producing both quality and quantities of products. They appeared to be drawn into the web of capitalism by incentives of profit and domination.

By enacting **Right Is Write** with each other and with their teacher, students manifested beginning awareness of inequities in the legitimated hierarchical system of role relationships. For example, students questioned unequal assets, disproportionate allocation of roles, differences in privileges, and unequal opportunities to obtain rewards. They proposed and discussed modifications but did not know enough to explicitly challenge the legitimacy of the game itself and its socioeconomic presuppositions.

Conclusion

Although the teacher's main formal or explicit curricular goals were to

evaluating skills to produce well written products, students also experienced certain socioeconomic values and conflicts. These were manifest, for instance, in the enactment of predetermined content presented to students, in their behavioral interpretation of assigned roles, through student-teacher interactions, and by student efforts to meet writing goals in the face of time constraints.

Through playing **Right Is Write**, students experienced a situation in which professional writing must be approved by an ascendant hierarchy of agents, editors, and publishers in order to reach an intended readership. They learned that upper echelon jobs are fewer but in greater demand and that people in different roles legitimately start out with unequal assets, unequal power, unequal privileges, and fixed opportunities.

By discerning such "incidental" normative learnings and by critically relating them to interactions and values characteristic of social systems, educators and students can become thinking acceptors or active change agents, rather than passive acceptors or perpetrators of societal inequities. Thus teachers and their students need to become aware of and critically analyze the hidden curriculum--implicit or unplanned learnings that take place in the classroom--in simulations and other interdisciplinary or exploratory activities. After reflection upon their inherent influences or values, teachers and students together can identify distortions or discrepancies in thinking and practice. Such reflections and discussions can become the focus of writing. Writing can then be taught as a tool for critical thinking and creative action to challenge injustices in both school and society.

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