

Fall 2007

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Jacqueline Preston
Utah Valley University, jpreston@uvu.edu

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Recommended Citation

Preston, Jacqueline. "There Again, Common Sense: Rethinking Literacy Through Ethnography." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2007, pp. 59–68, doi:10.25148/clj.2.1.009505.

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There Again, Common Sense: Rethinking Literacy Through Ethnography

Jacqueline Preston

This article revisits the debate between cultural and critical literacy through ethnography challenging popular academic views in education and literacy. Set in a preschool classroom at the inception of the “No Child Left Behind” initiative, this essay focuses on teaching assistant Marylou Anderson. Her experiences growing up in Appalachia inform a teaching philosophy that differs significantly from her colleagues. Her story invites us to reconsider how “the culture of power” functions as a formidable gatekeeper.

A few years ago on a breezy spring afternoon, I was sitting on a green leather couch in a preschool classroom. Marylou Anderson, her large frame nestled into one corner of the soft sofa, sat with me. I was conducting research on Appalachian transcultural experiences, and Marylou, who had been raised in the southern Ohio foothills of Appalachia, had agreed to talk with me. I met Marylou when I began teaching at the Early Childhood and Family Center. I was fresh out of the university, but she had been teaching, as an instructor’s assistant, for many years. I relied heavily on her expertise and practical approaches in the classroom, and, over the years, we became and remain good friends. As time passed, I took on new roles in the Center, eventually leaving to pursue a doctorate. Marylou grew less satisfied with her work and began thinking seriously about retiring. It was at this point that we sat to talk.

This study explores Marylou’s transition into mainstream culture and how her experiences growing up in Appalachia have shaped her worldview, her identity, her values, and her beliefs about teaching and how, by virtue of her history, she has not only come to rely on but also master a kind of alternative literacy, one that ultimately puts her at odds with both her colleagues and current movements in education. Contemporary trends in education emphasize philosophies and pedagogy that favor critical literacy over cultural literacy in the classroom. Yet, rarely is this debate visited through the eyes of individuals who are most affected by these pedagogies. Only recently have we begun to earnestly consider the perspectives of those whose backgrounds are non-mainstream and non-middle class. In composition and literacy studies, however, researchers employ methods such as ethnography and case study to gain a more comprehensive understanding of various issues relevant to the field. Seldom does this kind of research offer hard and definitive answers, yet it almost always calls on us as theorists,

researchers, and educators to rethink our firmly held theories and pedagogies. That is to say, these conversations with Marylou give us reason to pause.

When Marylou and I spoke, she had been working at the Early Childhood and Family Center for about twenty-five years. Throughout most of this time, she'd been a teaching assistant to Mrs. Chaney, a woman close to Marylou's age who shared a similar teaching philosophy. Marylou recalled with affection the time she'd spent with Mrs. Chaney in the classroom. Mrs. Chaney and Marylou shared many of the same clear objectives, all focused on preparing their students for transition into mainstream public school. They worked well together and often received strong praise from kindergarten teachers who received their graduates. In the last few years, though, following Mrs. Chaney's retirement, Marylou had become increasingly dissatisfied at work. Although Marylou's passion for teaching had not wavered, the methods and practices that new instructors used in the classroom often frustrated her. Over the past four years, Marylou had assisted three new teachers, all in their early twenties and in their first few years of teaching. Despite that Marylou had cultivated a personal relationship with each teacher, most recently the classroom was slowly becoming a kind of pedagogical contact zone aggravated by newly implemented federal and state mandates.

In the early years of the new millennium, the Bush Administration had implemented the "No Child Left Behind" initiative establishing "content standards" in practically every area of child development. For early childhood education, this political initiative, aimed at narrowing the "literacy gap" between the rich and the poor, stirred early childhood classrooms across the nation. Mandated assessments and state initiated curriculums forced teachers and administrators to revisit questions about what and how content should be taught. Marylou and the instructor she was currently assisting supported both a process-oriented approach in the classroom and the new emphasis on content standards. The instructor, however, emphasized the former, frequently providing creative, sensory-rich experiences and a panoply of opportunities for the children to learn. Marylou, on the other hand, emphasized the latter, focusing on content standards. She concentrated on *what* the children needed to learn in order to be academically successful and socially prepared for the public school setting. She worked with the children individually, emphasizing very specific social and academic skills. This difference in emphasis was often a source of conflict in the classroom. The tension between Marylou and the instructor appeared at first to be an issue of power, given Marylou's wealth of experience in the classroom and the instructor's youth and academic background; however, my conversations with Marylou regarding her personal history suggested there was more at stake than these apparent superficialities. Beyond the obvious differences in age and education was a clash of deeply rooted values regarding education and literacy, irritated and intensified by recent federal and state initiatives.

In many classrooms, an enlivened focus on standards, skills, and accountability implied a return to approaches in the classroom epitomized by E.D. Hirsch's "Cultural literacy" (1987), an approach to teaching that emphasizes skill building and prescriptive outcomes. Underlying this approach to education is the belief that our duty as educators is to pass on, from one generation to another, cultural capital¹. According to Hirsch, "to be culturally literate is to possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world" (xiii). And so our fundamental duty as educators is "to teach shared content"

(25). We educators, Hirsch reminds us “have a duty to those who lack cultural literacy to determine and disclose its contents” (26). Clearly, underlying the “No Child Left Behind” initiative was a call to educators to focus heavily on traditional literacies and pedagogies. Yet, among many contemporary literacy theorists, Hirsch’s cultural literacy had gained a reputation for being “old school,” intolerant of the literacies emerging out of non-mainstream and non-middle class discourses, and likely to produce “skill and drill” kinds of practices in the classroom. More popular among contemporary educators were pedagogies that reflected Paulo Freire’s “critical literacy” (Shor, 1987). Freire’s theories criticized cultural literacy theory insisting that these educational approaches prescribe to a kind of “banking” mentality that is oppressive, restricting students from learning in ways that inspire a critical consciousness. The goal of education according to Freire is not to view the learner as an empty container waiting to be filled with facts and skills but to see them as observers and creators of knowledge entering the learning process by engaging in and constructing their own reality (Freire 2). Early childhood pedagogies rooted, sometimes loosely, in Freirean theories placed emphasis on child-centered, process-oriented classrooms. While critical literacy inspired the instructor’s notion of “good teaching,” cultural literacy approaches such as that proposed by Hirsch are inherently connected to Marylou’s literacy experiences growing up in an economically depressed, rural community abutting Appalachia.

According to Marylou, as a child she had observed very little reading in the household, beyond her mother’s interest in a monthly magazine *True Story*. She did not remember her family receiving a newspaper or any other reading material through the mail other than the monthly bills. Marylou relayed to me that during her school years she did not see literacy and education as a means to advance, nor did she see any value in polishing and developing traditional notions of literacy. Instead, Marylou insisted, she developed a keen ability to read the world around her, manage obstacles, persevere difficult times, relish opportunities, and most importantly hone social skills that ultimately allowed her to pursue a life’s work that she considered meaningful and worthwhile. In Marylou’s words, she learned and used “common sense.” Marylou used the phrase “There again, common sense” repeatedly when speaking about her childhood, her adolescence, her marriage, and her experiences in the classroom. When I asked her how she defined common sense, she explained,

It’s being able to figure things out. When I was a kid, I had to figure things out for myself. I was a farm girl. You see so much and you do so much more. You have to think of other ways or solutions to a problem. I do think you gotta have common sense, and it’s more important than intelligence.

Marylou’s definition of common sense is not unlike that offered by psychologist Rodu Bogdan in *Mind and Common Sense: Philosophical Essays on Commonsense Psychology*. Bogdan refers to common sense as a form of folklore wisdom. Rather than relying on data structures or symbolic representations of a subject, common sense notions are about information that a person or situation conveys about the world, self and others within a social context (162). Bogdan explains it more fully in this way:

Common sense relies on an elaborate and powerful social practice of interpersonal attribution and evaluation of cognition and behavior. The common sense concepts appear to reflect not only properties of cognition and behavior but also environmental facts, as well as social norms and conventions. (2-3)

In other words, common sense not only reflects a learned approach to interpreting and responding to one's surroundings, but also a keen understanding of cultural expectations and conventions, what sociolinguist James Gee terms a "Discourse."

Gee defines "Discourse" as "ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body position, and clothes" (127). The idea that discourse is more than language expands our understanding of literacy beyond the confines of traditional literacy practices. Gee's notion of discourse suggests that Marylou's reliance on and mastery of common sense is for her a kind of literacy, a method of reading, writing, and responding to the world. According to Gee, an individual's literacy is inherently dependent on one's primary discourse – that which is constituted by our original home based social identity (137). In reference to both Bogdan and Gee, the following story illustrates how Marylou's literacy is firmly linked to her social identity and her developing common sense approach to solving problems. With good humor and clarity, Marylou recalls an anecdote involving her mother and older sister:

When I was two, we had mice in the house. Mom was scared to death of mice and so was Linda, [Marylou's sister]. We had a fireplace in this one room. That's where the mice was at. Mom said, "Let's give Marylou a hammer. She'll kill those mice." So they put me in this room, and the mouse would come out and 'bamm' I'd kill it. Mom and Linda were peekin' through the door. I suppose Mom thought I was strong willed—to put me in there to kill those mice.

Here Marylou's interpretation of this event suggests that this story not only illustrates the formation of identity but also a kind of literacy that is rooted not in theoretical ponderings but in an understanding of what actions are required within a particular context.

Certainly, economic circumstances reinforced and strengthened Marylou and her family's reliance on common sense. She states that a turn of events took place after her father lost the family farm and began drinking heavily. Although, her mother and father remained married, her father found work away from home. Marylou remembers the majority of these years as a struggle to survive with only the family's basic needs met. Running water was not available, food was scarce, and clothing was worn or secondhand and limited. When I asked Marylou how the family survived, she replied, "There again, common sense":

We had one pair [of shoes] a year, so we didn't wear shoes in the summer, so we could save those shoes for school, and we had wild blackberries growin' on the farm already, so we'd make use of them. We'd make jelly or Mom would make pies. We didn't have a refrigerator, so Mom kept Kenny's milk in the well to keep cold.

Again Marylou's story echoes Bogdan's description of "folkloric wisdom" as highly dependent on environmental facts and social context, an appropriate (albeit sometimes short term) response to a lack of traditional means (such as education and employment) for accessing and preserving goods and resources. Like many women of Appalachia, Marylou learned to consider her environment, assess her role, "maneuver her wits," and meet challenges and obstacles with determination, perseverance, and common sense (Smith 4).

At eighteen, after graduating from high school, Marylou married and gave birth to three children. Although Marylou had some work experience prior to her marriage and the births of her children, she did not work outside the home after her marriage until her children reached school age. When the children entered school, Marylou became less satisfied with her work at home. She stated, "I was getting to feel like I was a nothin' or a nobody at home. I needed to do somethin' for myself." Despite her husband's disapproval, Marylou, through friends, acquired a position as an instructor's assistant at the Early Childhood and Family Center, a Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (MRDD) program serving both typically developing children and children with disabilities. Marylou's new job caused considerable difficulty for Marylou, resulting in sometimes abusive reactions from her husband. In Marylou's words, "He threw a fit. He cussed, cussed at me. He poured the work on then—made me go out in the morning and work the hogs." Marylou remembered with good humor and yet mild resentment her husband's insistence that she fix two different breakfasts, one for him and one for their children, work with the animals, cut wood for the wood burning stove, and perform a host of farm chores before she left for work in the morning and after she returned in the late afternoon. Yet, Marylou responded to this with the strength and resolve she had come to rely on in her childhood. Her ability to adapt was also apparent in her work.

Despite challenges, shifts in administration, constantly changing state and federal mandates, and new and demanding certification requirements, she remained at the school for over twenty-five years. According to Marylou, she depended primarily on common sense and willful determination to help her transition into this new community. As an assistant, Marylou worked closely with university-educated teachers whose socioeconomic backgrounds differed greatly from hers. When I asked Marylou how she felt about her teaching compared to the instructors she worked alongside, Marylou's shoulders straightened, and she smiled: "They were better educated than me but not better." Her response resonated a confidence about teaching that I sensed throughout our interview. She stated that in the early years especially she felt comfortable in the classroom maintaining a strong sense of her role, and she felt that the classroom instructor valued her contributions. However, as Marylou shared with me, this feeling began to wane as she confronted new teachers and new pedagogies.

With obvious consternation, Marylou insisted that in recent years she had seen a decrease in the instructors' ability to use common sense in their teaching, opting instead for more theory-based instruction. This shift often created tension between Marylou and the current teacher in particular, as I observed one day. In Marylou's classroom, she assists Claire, a cheery young woman in her early twenties. Claire's enthusiasm for teaching is evident in her quick step, easy smile, and liberal affection for the children. She is bright and full of fresh ideas for her classroom, often staying late into the evening preparing a plethora of activities and opportunities for the children to learn. On this day, Lindsey, a tiny girl with long, brown hair falling in soft curls to her waist, stretches over an art table scattered with an array of art supplies, beads, rice, feathers, papers of every color, children's scissors, glue sticks, pastes, and glitter. Lindsey folds her small fingers around one the many glue bottles Claire has placed on the table for the children to experiment with. Soon Lindsey becomes fascinated with how the glue, when squeezed from the bottle, forms a gooey white puddle on her paper. She watches intently as the puddle grows.

For Claire, who values a child-centered and process-oriented approach to teaching, Lindsey is engaging in what Claire believes is a worthwhile educational experience. According to a child-centered approach, Lindsey is learning about her ability to control tools and experiencing learning in an exciting engaging manner that will likely inspire her to initiate similar learning experiences in the future. Marylou, however, views Lindsey's experience with the glue as an opportunity for a different kind of learning. Marylou interrupts the sensory-rich experience in order to teach the little girl that she is to make "dots, not puddles" with her glue. While Claire tactfully insists that the child should experience how the glue can be manipulated and that the experience is indeed valuable, Marylou maintains that the child desperately needs to learn, instead, that resources are limited and most importantly that this behavior will not be acceptable when she reaches kindergarten. In various textures, this scenario is repeated throughout the school year, increasing the tension between Marylou and Claire.

Marylou's focus on what Lindsey needs to learn to transition into public kindergarten, what Gee refers to as a dominant discourse,² suggests that, while Marylou may not articulate it, she is particularly sensitive to what Lisa Delpit refers to as the "culture of power" (24). Delpit, in *Other People's Children*, explores issues of power and its relevance to the alienation teachers of non-white, non-middle-class communities often experience when confronted with liberal educational movements, such as child-centered, process-orientated classrooms. Reviewed here are the five significant components to what Delpit terms "the culture of power":

- Issues of power are enacted in classrooms
- There are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a "culture of power"
- The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power
- If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier
- Those with power are frequently least aware of – or least willing to acknowledge – its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence. (24)

Exploring Delpit's notion of a "culture of power" contributes to a fuller understanding of Marylou's focus on content and skills and the resulting tension Marylou experiences in the classroom. While process-oriented pedagogy seeks to validate diversity and offer developmentally appropriate practices by providing creative learning opportunities, teachable moments, and rich and frequent sensory experience, issues of power and the immediate and crucial needs of children from non-mainstream cultures become secondary and are often ignored. It is Marylou's economic background and common sense literacy that heightens her awareness of this issue.

Delpit posits that these practices are based on misconceptions about children emerging from what many regard as a "poverty culture." In the same way that Delpit notes that instructors assume that children from non-mainstream cultures are in need of cultivating a voice, some process-oriented approaches reinforce the notion that children from non-mainstream cultures are deprived of sensory experience. Marylou's response to Claire's approach to teaching echoes Delpit's belief that what children outside the culture of power lack is not a voice or experiences but a discourse that is in alignment with the dominant culture (17-18). According to Marylou, spending time engaging in sensory experience while ignoring skill development and content is not only the result of arrogant assumptions but also a tragic waste of time. As Marylou is increasingly confronted with instructors emerging from within the "culture of power," teachers trained in theory-based, child-centered, process-oriented pedagogy, she struggles to maintain what she believes is her fundamental responsibility to her students. When I asked Marylou what she understood her main role in the classroom to be, she responded, "to get them ready for kindergarten." She speaks with enthusiasm and determination regarding her relationship with her students and the need for skills, consistency, and high expectations. Marylou maintains that the children respect and appreciate her decisiveness and sincerity: "I can see the good I do for the kids—giving them boundaries. They respect and want those guidelines and appreciate it—appreciate me for expecting it."

Given current trends in education, Marylou is often criticized by other instructors and administrators for being too "skills oriented" and not "process oriented" enough (23). To many, her pedagogical methods appear overly firm and her boundaries uncompromising. Yet, according to Marylou and education specialists such as Delpit, for children who may not have access to traditional literacies in their primary discourses, content standards and skills are necessary components for survival and success in the public school setting. To suggest otherwise is to assume that all children are prepared within their primary discourse community to maneuver successfully and easily through the education system. By either assuming that necessary academic and social skills will be taught at home or ignoring the significance of these skills, educators inadvertently act as gatekeepers, excluding children from acquiring skills necessary to be successful in the dominant culture. For Marylou, common sense dictates that acquiring the basic skills expected by the dominant culture accesses goods, resources, and agency.

Her strong reliance on common sense is intrinsically connected to her mistrust of theory-based, process-oriented approaches to education and the assumptions they carry with them. For Marylou process-oriented approaches to education are not entirely unnecessary but seldom are they the means to progress for those students who do not have full access to school-based literacies in their home discourses. Common sense

suggests then that cultural literacy approaches to education and conventional pedagogies address more efficiently the immediate needs of students from non-dominant cultures.

Yet a number of literacy specialists, linguists, and theorists question conventional methods and practices. Traditional pedagogies, such as that proposed by Marylou, are often based on the meritocratic assumption that every student, regardless of his or her home discourse, can easily assume a secondary discourse in a classroom setting, an assumption that increasingly falls into question in current research. Not only has the field of linguistics contributed much to our understanding of this issue but

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also recent work by literacy specialists such as Deborah Brandt. Ethnographic research presented in Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives* (2001) poignantly illustrates that economic development often sets the terms for individual's access to literacy ("Sponsors" 169). According to Brandt, literacies are routinely acquired outside the classroom supported by "sponsors of literacy" (1998), a term Brandt uses to describe any "agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract,

who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy" (166). Thus, students enter the classroom with diverse and varied levels of literacies informed by a range of social and economic factors. They are asked to assume the dominant discourse of the school. Yet, according to recent research in the field of linguistics, unless supported by apprenticeship like relationships, most students of non-dominant cultures will have difficulty mastering this secondary discourse in the classroom (Gee 147).

In this way, public education situates many students at a marked disadvantage inadvertently reinforcing stratification along socioeconomic lines rather than opening up pathways and opportunities for students to access educational and economic resources. Delpit's response to this educational dilemma is to insist that rules governing the culture of power need to be made explicit. Yet, even in the rare case that instruction is explicit, few instructors today can disregard the psychological implications of insisting students assume a dominant discourse (Soliday 62). Literacy narratives and qualitative studies (Brodkey, Harrington, Mignolo, Moll and Gonzalez, Shen, Villanueva) leave little doubt as to how such practices relegate many students to a "marginal" position in the classroom, especially students whose primary home communities, dialects, and preferred literacies differ widely from those favored in the academy. For these reasons, viewpoints such as Marylou's seem shortsighted, and traditional pedagogies continue to fall out of favor with many academics.

Nonetheless, common sense insists that we not ignore the realities that exist for students negotiating transitions from non-dominant cultures to mainstream public institutions with their firmly established power structures. Highly sensitive to social

context and the conventions that inform powerful hierarchies, Marylou reminds us that as educators, researchers, and theorists, we have much to learn from the experiences and alternative literacies of those emerging from non-dominant cultures. If indeed our objective is to provide an education that serves students of both dominant and non-discourses, and if we truly want to effect positive change in our education system, then we must consider the perspectives of those we purport to serve. Although Marylou's pedagogical views may remain, to many contemporary theorists, naive and limited, her story calls us to resist comfortable answers that stop outside the classroom door. As long as public school represents the dominant culture, there is little doubt that students emerging from non-dominant cultures need the skills that will help them move smoothly into and through the school system. As one critical literacy theorist states, "The question is not whether or not they should be taught the skills of survival, but how and to what ends" (Auerbach and Burgess 166). "There again, common sense."

Notes

¹ Cultural capital constitutes the skills; knowledge; education; social sensitivities, any advantages a person has which give him or her a higher socioeconomic status including high standards and expectations. Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron first used the term in *Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction*, 1973 (In *The Forms of Capital* 1986).

² Gee describes dominant discourses as those discourses, "the mastery of which, bring with it the (potential) acquisition of social "goods" (money, prestige, status, etc.)" as opposed to non-dominant discourses or those discourses, the mastery of which often brings solidarity with a particular social network, but not wider status and social goods in the society at large (Gee 528).

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Jacqueline Preston teaches writing at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where she is a doctoral student in composition and rhetoric. She holds both a master's degree in Humanities and English-Composition/Rhetoric from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. Her research interests include alternative discourses and competing rhetorics, working class studies, and ethnography. Her e-mail address is jspreston@wisc.edu.