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Composition Forum 30, Fall 2014

## “Journalism, Poetry, Stand-Up Comedy, and Academic Writing: Mapping the Interplay of Curricular and Extracurricular Literate Activities”: Re-visiting a Theoretical Lens Five Years Later

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Published in a 2008 issue of *Journal of Basic Writing (JBW)*, “Journalism, Poetry, Stand-Up Comedy, and Academic Writing: Mapping the Interplay of Curricular and Extracurricular Literate Activities” was my first single-authored publication. Drawn from data collected for the first case study from my dissertation work, a five-year study of Charles Scott, Jr., an undergraduate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the article examined the synergies between Charles’s extracurricular journalism, poetry, and stand-up comedy and his literate activities for two courses during his initial semester at college. Based on my analysis of the data I had collected, the two documented narratives at the heart of the article elaborate Charles’s use of textual practices from his experiences with extracurricular journalism, poetry, and stand-up comedy to successfully meet the literate demands of two of the introductory courses (*Rhetoric 101* and *Speech 101*) he took during his first semester of college. To accomplish the analytical writing tasks for his *Rhetoric 101* class, Charles appeared to draw upon practices developed from his earlier experiences with researching and writing news stories, namely using information from surveys as the basis for his journalistic pieces. To succeed at the speeches required for *Speech 101*, Charles redeployed practices he developed while performing stand-up comedy routines and giving public readings of his poetry.

My efforts on this article from its earliest drafts during my doctoral program through the revisions with the patient and truly talented editorial team at *JBW* taught me a great deal about how to structure an article-length argument, how to frame my work in light of relevant bodies of scholarship, and how to write up my analysis of the data I presented. In the years since it appeared in print, the article has continued to function as a key source of insight and inspiration for me. Six years’ worth of exchanges with colleagues, conference presentations related to this article, studies with other co-researchers examining similar phenomena, and engagements with the growing body of scholarship related to relationship among literate engagements have provided many opportunities for me to reflect on theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical approaches I elaborated and argued for. Perhaps more than any other article from that period of my career, “Journalism, Poetry, Stand-Up Comedy, and Academic Writing” has continually invited me to revisit the theoretical framework I employed and to understand the need to extend that framework in a number of key ways. Much of my thinking over the past few years has been directed toward extending the theoretical lens to address a wider range of communicative resources at play in literate activity, to more fully acknowledge the identity work at the heart writing, and to account for the tensions that arise between meditative means and the literate actions to which they are put. Beyond revisiting theory, this article also continues to push me to continually re-examine my conceptions of students and the richly literate lives they lead.

As a way to understand what I sensed was Charles connecting school and non-school literate activities, in “Journalism, Poetry, Stand-Up Comedy, and Academic Writing” I articulated a theoretical lens that made visible the linking together of seemingly disparate engagements often widely separated across time and space. Assembled from the work of Lev Vygotsky and Ron Scollon, this approach emphasized the heterogeneous networks of practices and artifacts that shape human action. I had been introduced to Vygotsky’s *Thought and Language* in a graduate seminar during my doctoral program, and had been drawn to his attention to the central role of culturally constructed tools in the mediation of action, particularly his crucial insight that humans’ ability to act with cultural tools did not develop solely within any single context or setting but rather within networks of other tools employed in other activities. I had initially encountered Ron Scollon’s work while searching the literature on mediated action related to scholarship of James Wertsch (*Mind as Action, Voices of the Mind*). Like Vygotsky’s work, Scollon’s *Mediated Discourse: The Nexus of Practice* attends to how persons come to act with meditative means and especially to the

way seemingly disparate social practices are linked across diverse sites of engagement and thus to the interdependent nature of their development. One of the key theoretical constructs Scollon forwards is “nexus of practice,” his term to describe “a network or matrix of intersecting practices which, although they are never perfectly or inevitably linked into any finalized or finalizable latticework of regular patterns, nevertheless form a network or nexus” (16). Given that I was working to understand the relationship among Charles’s multiple and quite different engagements with writing, Vygotsky’s attention to the tools that mediate action and Scollon’s notion of “nexus of practice” seemed like an especially fitting means for viewing literate practice as both situated in specific sites and dispersed across multiple activities. As an analytic lens, it accounted for both persons’ practices in specific sites of engagement as well as how practices are restructured along historical trajectories that feed into and emanate from those sites. With its close attention to practice, this framework helped to make visible the key practices Charles had acted with in accomplishing a wealth of literate activities outside of school and what appeared to me as Charles’s reuse of some of those practices for different school-sponsored activities.

Although the analysis using that lens was satisfactory at the time, Kenneth Burke reminds us in *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* that “a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing” (49). As I have returned over the past few years to my analysis of Charles’s reuse of literate practices across these activities, I have come to recognize that while the theoretical perspective I employed rendered visible the textual practices linking Charles’s textual activities for *Rhetoric 101* and *Speech 101* with his extracurricular stand-up comedy, poetry, and journalism, it also worked to obscure a number of other potential ways that those literate engagements might be related. In foregrounding matters of textual practice, this lens made a bit less visible a number of other elements of communicative action that can be redeployed across sites. Six key interactions over the past few years helped change the way I see Charles’s experiences. Conversations with Paul Prior, and subsequent readings and re-readings of his own detailed tracings of textual activity in *Writing/Disciplinarity*, pointed to the need to attend closely to the circulation of discourse across seemingly disconnected texts and textual activities. Reading some of the work Ron Scollon published after *Mediated Discourse*, particularly a short article titled “Discourse Itineraries,” encouraged me to consider the profoundly intertextual nature of images and how often they can be taken up across activities widely separated in space, time, and purpose. Working on projects with Paul Prior, Julie Hengst, and Jody Shipka, especially Paul and Julie’s edited collection titled *Exploring Semiotic Remediation as Discourse Practice*, and conversations with my colleague Steve Fraiberg following the publication of his article titled “Composition 2.0: Toward a Multilingual and Multimodal Framework” in *College Composition and Communication* encouraged me to attend closely to the transformations across representational media, including bodies and mental representations, that accompany the reuse of communicative resources across activities, which really served to impress upon me how making *a priori* decisions to only attend to particular representational media can limit the kinds of linkages across seemingly disparate activities rendered visible during data analysis. Reading and re-reading Stephen Witte’s “Context, Text, Intertext: Toward a Constructivist Semiotic of Writing” pushed me to think about the many different ways that texts can be linked into multiple contexts and the many forms that “intertext” might take. Conversations with colleagues such as Elizabeth Wardle (“Creative Repurposing for Expansive Learning”) and Kathi Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak (*Writing Across Contexts*; “Notes toward A Theory of Prior Knowledge”), coupled with readings of their work, helped to give shape to my understanding of the various kinds of writing-related knowledge and dispositions that persons bring from their prior experiences with literacy. The scholarship of Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe (*Literate Lives in the Information Age*) and recent publications by Stacey Pigg (“Coordinating Constant Invention: Social Media’s Role in Distributed Work”) helped orient me to toward the highly digitized nature of literate life in the twenty-first century.

These interactions were crucial in helping me to understand the benefits of attending more closely to a wider array of elements involved in communicative activity, and the usefulness of theoretical approaches expansive enough to do so. Consider, for example, Ron Scollon’s argument for “tracing pathways and trajectories of texts, actions, practices, and objects, of people and communications across time and space and multiple modes” (“Discourse” 241), a move which addresses not just practices but texts, objects, actions, and persons across multiple sites and also accounts for their reworking through multiple representational media. Likewise, Paul Prior and Jody Shipka’s notion of “chronotopic lamination” in “Chronotopic Lamination: Tracing the Contours of Literate Activity” addresses a broader array of elements that texture acts of reading and writing. Coupling the theoretical work of Mikhail Bakhtin and Erving Goffman, Prior and Shipka’s “chronotopic lamination” addresses “the dispersed, fluid chains of places, times, people, and artifacts that come to be tied together in trajectories of literate action along with the ways multiple activity footings are held and managed” (181). As I returned to the data Charles and I had collected to write a second article based on his school writing (see Roozen, “Comedy Stages, Poets Projects, Sports Columns, and Kinesiology” 341), Prior and Shipka’s view of “chronotopic lamination” would prove particularly productive in terms of understanding additional linkages among his school and non-school literacies informed his academic work during his later college writing. Taking up “chronotopic lamination” as a theoretical lens, the analysis of that data made visible the ways that Charles repurposed discourses of sports and racism from his extracurricular journalism stories, his poetry, and his stand-up comedy material to meet the reading and writing demands of an upper-division kinesiology

class he enrolled in at the same time he was still completing his second semester of the basic writing sequence in first-year composition.

The description and analysis of Charles's literate life I offered in "Journalism, Poetry, Stand-Up Comedy, and Academic Writing" also didn't devote explicit attention to Charles's interactions with digital tools and technologies. The length of the article did not permit me to fully address the multimodal nature of Charles's reworking of practice across engagements in great depth and detail, but I was able to at least acknowledge it toward the end of the article, where I wrote:

In addition to the heterogeneous and heterochronic complexity of this nexus, I am also struck by its profoundly multimodal nature. The texts, practices, and activities that Charles acts with have been repurposed not just across time, space, and genre, but across mode as well. The poems originally written for the People's Poets Project's collections, for example, were read aloud from those volumes at the African American Cultural Center, and portions of news stories originally written for the news magazine were later embodied, enacted, and voiced in Charles' stand-up performances. (25)

I'm still struck, though, by how little attention the analysis devoted to the digital elements of Charles's richly literate life. The data collection certainly included the digital texts and technologies mediating Charles's literate engagements. Charles's extracurricular journalism, for example, involved a lot of communicating with people via email and a great deal of digital drafting and revising of his news stories. It also involved Charles accessing and reading a lot of information from a variety of websites. The same was true of his stand-up comedy routine. In addition to a wealth of websites he frequented while looking for material for his act, much of the fodder for his routine came from emails sent to him from his friends and members of his family. It also came from watching sports shows and news programs on television. Likewise, Charles's poetry writing also immersed him in a densely digital world. Part of writing and publishing his poetry involved drafting and revising on his desktop computer, incorporating digital images to accompany some of his poems, experimenting with different fonts and sizes of text, and using software programs for the page layout. In addition, my analysis did not address the role that the digital played in the repurposing of literate activities across his school and non-school engagements. Part of the work of redeploying the practices I described involved remediating them digitally as well, but the digital tools and technologies that accomplished that work did not receive explicit treatment in my analysis.

Looking back at "Journalism, Poetry, Stand-Up Comedy, and Academic Writing," I also recognized the need to address with much more analytic depth the role of identity, the construction of self, in Charles's weaving and unweaving of literate activities and in shaping the pace and path of his literate development more broadly. While learning has often been understood as a matter of acquiring new information and skills, a large body of scholarship has argued persuasively for understanding learning as primarily a matter of identity, as an issue of becoming a different kind of person (Beach, Wenger, Wortham). In *Communities of Practice*, for example, Etienne Wenger brings the role of identity in the learning when he writes, "We are always simultaneously dealing with specific situations, participating in the histories of certain practices, and involved in becoming certain kinds of persons" (155). Given the prominent role of discourse in the construction of self, scholarship has also located identity at the center of literacy learning. In their article "Writing and Being Written: Issues of Identity Across Timescales," for example, Amy Burgess and Roz Ivanic argue that since "the literacy practices in which people engage cannot be separated from the processes whereby they identify with or resist particular social positionings" (232), writing and learning to write is essentially an act of identity.

Although I would only come to realize it after deeper and more prolonged engagement with Scollon's work, his thinking in *Mediated Discourse* provided a way of bringing the roles of identity and social positioning into sharper focus, something that had escaped me during my initial readings. Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus, Scollon argues, "As social action is based in habitus and habitus is the aggregation of history in concrete, sociocultural circumstances, any action which is taken reproduces (and claims, imputes, contests, and recontextualizes) the identities of prior social actions as well as negotiates new positions" (7). Clearly, for Scollon, and in keeping with Wenger's earlier point, acting with cultural tools is just as much about accomplishing the social action at hand as it is about actively constructing and asserting a particular identity. As a way of keeping identity work at the fore in understanding mediated action, Scollon suggests that we focus on the identities that are being produced through the use of cultural tools rather than simply on the tools themselves. Maintaining this kind of focus, however, is not easy, especially given the often subtle, nuanced nature of identity work and social positioning and the lengthy timescales over which it is accomplished.

Recognizing the complex interactions between literate practice and the construction of identity (and the complexity of the ongoing work of assembling identity in itself) poses some real challenges, but two key interactions around "Journalism, Poetry, Stand-Up Comedy, and Academic Writing" helped me understand the need to make those interactions more present in my analysis of the data Charles and I collected. First, ongoing conversations about the

article with my colleague Steve Lamos helped me recognize the workings of social positioning in literate activity that had initially escaped my attention. Lamos's use of critical race theory as a lens for analyzing race-conscious writing programs in *In the Interests of Opportunity: Race, Racism, and University Writing Instruction in the Post-Civil Rights Era* proved particularly productive for me. I also benefited from the insights he shared regarding Deborah Brandt's careful examination of patterns of sponsorship in *Literacy in American Lives*, particularly those patterns that animated literacy in African American communities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The second interaction involved my own efforts to define "literate activity," a term I had used frequently throughout the article, and about which colleagues and students began questions after the article was published. While reading back through some of my early notes and rereading some of the key sources that had informed my work on the article, I was drawn to passages that pointed to the linkages between the writing persons engage in and their concrete positioning as actual persons in the world. Defining "literate activity" in "Chronotopic Lamination," for example, Prior and Shipka write that "literate activity is about noting less than ways of being in the world, forms of life. [...] It is especially about the ways we not only come to inhabit made-worlds, but constantly make our own world—the ways we select from, (re)structure, fiddle with, and transform the material and social worlds we inhabit" (182). As one example of the intimate connection between the writer's social life and the literate activity in which she is engaged, the authors offer a brief description of how a female psychology professor's academic writing is mediated by the gendered work of doing laundry and other family and household chores (180). In turn, Prior and Shipka's notion of "literate activity" builds upon the definition Prior provides in *Writing/Disciplinarity*, where he writes that literate activity "is not located in acts of reading and writing, but as cultural forms of life saturated with textuality" (138). The definitions and examples offered in these sources powerfully underscore the need to address the social lives of the persons engaged in literate activity rather than focusing on just the activity itself or the cultural tools used to accomplish it.

These two interactions challenged me to more carefully consider Charles's identities as a person in the world, and particularly how the literate practices that I had examined so closely both reflected his concrete experiences as a black man growing up on Chicago's South Side and perhaps served as a means for him to potentially reshape how that social identity might be positioned at large, predominantly white university. After all, Charles's experiences using survey data, for example, were the result of his work at *New Expression*, a news magazine managed and authored by minority youth from the Chicago area and sponsored, in Deborah Brandt's sense of the word, by a long-standing initiative to involve minority youth in journalism. Charles's engagements with poetry and stand-up comedy similarly had their roots in his work with *New Expression*, but they were also connected to the campus's African American Cultural Center that hosted the poetry readings in which Charles participated.

Informed by the interactions with Steve Lamos and some of the key sources on literate activity, my analysis of Charles's experiences during his second semester of college (see Roozen, "Comedy Stages") provided much closer analytic attention to the kinds of identity work at the heart of his curricular and extracurricular literacies. The analysis of that data elaborates the discourses of race and racism that texture Charles's extracurricular journalism, poetry, stand-up comedy, and the reading and writing for a kinesiology course he took during his second semester of college. Ultimately, the article argues that Charles's uses of racial discourse in his extracurricular journalism, poetry, and stand-up comedy function to enhance his reading and analysis of a book-length ethnographic study of professional baseball, particularly the author's examination of baseball's racial problems. Based on the analysis of that data, I argue that Charles benefited from laminating his curricular and extracurricular literacies in a number of ways:

Perhaps most importantly, Charles's knowledge of sports and race afforded him the opportunity to weave his school and non-school worlds together, to write himself into the university's curriculum in ways that let him create and maintain the racial identity he claimed for himself as an African American, which was no small task at a large and predominantly white college. (119)

Without a way of thinking carefully about the social positioning and construction of self at play in literate acts, I don't think I would have recognized Charles's efforts toward this kind of identity work.

As I have returned to my earlier article, I have also recognized the need to attend more closely to the tensions that mark the repurposing of communicative elements across engagements. Reading back through the two documented narratives at the heart of the article, I realize how smoothly I characterized these reuses, as if the practices Charles has drawn from his out-of-school encounters with literacy fit more or less exactly with the curricular tasks he turned them to. Take, for example, my statement that "this article elaborates the synergies between Charles's extracurricular literate activities and his writing for two courses during his initial semester at the university. I argue that Charles's performance in these classes is enhanced by an extensive network of practices, artifacts, and activities from his non-school literate engagements" (9). By foregrounding the "synergies" between Charles's engagements that "enhance" his academic work, the statement suggests that the resources from Charles's extracurricular activities were perfectly suited for accomplishing his curricular ones.

And yet, in focusing so heavily on the synergies between seemingly disparate activities, and thus in highlighting the seemingly precise fit between the Charles's extracurricular practices and the curricular uses for which he repurposed them, my sense is that I overlooked some of the tensions that might have arisen as Charles redeployed those practices. As with the case of my thinking about identity, this realization about the need to address tensions as well as synergies slowly began to dawn through more sustained engagement with Scollon's scholarship as well as James Wertsch's work (*Mind as Action, Voices of the Mind*) on mediated action. Both of these scholars are quick to point out that the cultural tools that shape human action function as both affordances and constraints to that action, and, further, that many of the tools we employ were actually created for other purposes entirely (see, for example, Wertsch's insightful discussion in *Mind as Action* about the initial development of fiberglass and its subsequent re-uses for a host of unforeseen activities).

For Scollon, whose work I had drawn on most heavily for "Journalism, Poetry, Stand-Up Comedy, and Academic Writing," one of the key characteristics of the meditational means that shape social action is that they are "partial" in that they "never fit the action exactly. Only some of the characteristics [of the particular meditational means] may be called upon in any specific action. Thus a meditational means affords some actions but this lack of exact fit to concrete actions means the meditational means also limits and focuses that action" (*Mediated Discourse* 121). While the "partial" nature of meditational means suggests that they serve to constrain action, even if in subtle, perhaps unrecognizable ways, their "partialness" also has important implications for those learning to act with that tool. Based on his fine-grained analysis of practices being woven into different nexus, Scollon concludes that "this movement into new circumstances is always partial and always involves further adjustments and accommodations of the practice in the habitus to these new objective conditions" (*Mediated Discourse* 141). Similar to the concept of "restructuring" that Pierre Bourdieu explains in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (87), Scollon views practice as emerging from the continual "adjustments and accommodations" needed to refashion the practice for use in "new objective conditions" (141). "In this sense," writes Scollon, "practice is always, to borrow Bakhtin's terms, unfinalizable. A practice changes with each action as does the habitus of the social actor" (167). The "adjustments and accommodations" to the practice are not just relevant in refashioning them for use in present circumstances; they also figure prominently in opening up practice for potential future uses. "Each use," writes Scollon, "elaborates and complicates" practice as it consolidated in the habitus, and "therefore each use opens up the potential for more complex uses" (*Mediated Discourse* 135) in the near and distant future. For Scollon, the tensions between cultural tools and the action they are employed to accomplish are generative in nature, prompting changes in the tools and the action that can be productive both for the present and for the future. King Beach offers a similar view of these kinds of tensions, arguing that such disruptions, provided they are not insurmountable, can serve as the engine for creating new forms of practice and knowledge ("Consequential Transitions" 57). In attending so closely to the synergies between Charles's extracurricular practices and the uses to which he put them in his college classes, then, I overlooked the subtle tensions that arose as Charles repurposed these practices, and thus missed the chance at the time to learn something about the work involved in attuning and localizing cultural tools for use in new sites and, perhaps more importantly, about how Charles developed his ability to act with these practices in the present as well as how those practices were being "elaborated" for potential uses in Charles's near and distant future.

Although there are myriad ways that I have come to see Charles' experiences differently in the intervening years, I still find the original piece useful as a space to reflect on my teaching. In the same way that it prompts me to revisit my original theoretical framing, and to think critically as I examine new ones, "Journalism, Poetry, Stand-Up Comedy, and Academic Writing: Mapping the Interplay of Curricular and Extracurricular Literate Activities" also continues to serve as a source of inspiration for my teaching and the conceptions of students' literate lives that inform it. In *Academic Writing as Social Practice*, Linda Brodkey urges those invested in researching and teaching writing to continually "see writing anew, to look at it from yet other vantage points" (62). Whenever I think about Brodkey's prompting, and I think about it a great deal, my mind immediately runs to how I saw, and at the same time didn't see, Charles's writing and Charles as a writer, particularly the moment I realized that as Charles's *Rhetoric 101* teacher I had overlooked the richly literate life he led when he wasn't seated in my composition classroom. In the closing portion of "Journalism, Poetry, Stand-Up Comedy, and Academic Writing," I tried to communicate to readers the feelings I had as Charles's richly literate life beyond my class came into focus for me and as I thought through the juxtaposition of Charles's many successes outside of school and his struggles in the course. Attempting to capture what I felt at the time, I wrote:

Thinking back some seven years to the *Rhetoric 101* tutorial sessions and subsequent interviews during which Charles initially introduced me to the richly literate life he led outside of school, I can still vividly recall how powerfully this revelation hit me both as a teacher and as a fledgling writing researcher who had just begun a doctoral program in Writing Studies that same semester. I had spent the previous decade teaching writing at a variety of secondary and post-secondary institutions, and it had never struck me that the students in my classes might write for purposes other than school, or

even to ask them if they did. (28)

Revising the article for publication involved no small amount of condensing and cutting, and I recall thinking hard about omitting this section in order to make space to emphasize a few points a bit further and add some additional concluding remarks. Ultimately, though, this was one of the most important insights I as a teacher had taken from my work with Charles, and I couldn't bring myself to write it out of the story of the collaborative research we'd done and of my own development as a teacher. The richness and complexity of Charles's literate life, and how easily it could be obscured, still hits me just as powerfully, if not more so, even now, some seven years after writing that passage and some fourteen years after that tutorial session with Charles. It is at the forefront of my mind as I create new classes for learners at all levels—from first-year composition to upper-division classes in my university's Writing and Rhetoric major to graduate courses that introduce MA and PhD students to Writing Studies and the teaching of First-Year Composition—as I revise syllabi and design writing assignments and class activities, and as I think about meeting my students on the first day of class. Continually reflecting on Charles's life and his experiences in my class serves as a constant reminder that as a teacher I need to work hard at seeing writing and writers anew, at productively challenging my notions of writing and what it entails and how writing abilities develop. It especially makes me realize how important it is that I communicate my assumptions about writing to myself and my students, and to understand the assumptions that my students carry with them. Fortunately, I don't have to do this work alone. I'm lucky to work with a number of colleagues, many in my department and institution and many at other institutions across the nation and even beyond, who are also deeply invested in understanding the literacies that animate students' lives and what that knowledge means for our teaching and administrative work.

As I plan the First-Year Composition class I'm teaching that begins just a few short weeks from now, thinking about Charles prompts me think hard about the kinds of experiences with writing I am going to encounter as I get to know the students enrolled in the course and the kinds of texts they are acting with for other classes and for their civic, personal, and professional purposes. I'm also very conscious of shaping the course in a way that recognizes, values, and promotes the richness of students' literate lives. How can I bring their literate experiences into the conversations we'll have this semester about writing and rhetoric and language? Based on my experiences with Charles, it gives me pause to even refer to the people in my classes as "students." "Students" is such a powerful term that so foregrounds peoples' identities in school and their participation with the kinds of texts valued there that it can obscure other identities and activities. It seems better to think about them as "literate persons in the world." Although kind of cumbersome, and definitely not the term I use when I speak with faculty from other part of the university, "literate persons" does at least begin to capture the densely textual nature of the lives of persons who find their way onto our class rolls and the relationship between literate action and the construction of the person, the identity work inherent in using and learning language and literacy. It gives voice to the sense that the persons enrolled in our courses are and have been for a long time acting with all different kinds of texts and inscriptional tools to accomplish all kinds of rhetorical work.

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