Power in Practice: Teacher Negotiation of Constraints in an Age of Standardization
Desi Krell
University of Florida
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Abstract
With the myriad mandates from federal, state, and local levels, teachers are on shifting sands. Local mandates often impose certain teaching practices to meet state and federal requirements that focus on standardized testing outcomes. In a time in which immense value is placed upon high stakes tests, four English teachers have found ways to work with or around mandates in order to meet requirements while continuing to facilitate quality student learning, often in spite of mandates. Teaching different populations in different contexts, these four teachers represent a spectrum of ways to successfully negotiate mandates and demonstrate how to walk the fine line between pushing back and maintaining job security.

Purpose
Nearly 100 years ago, Bobbitt (1918) and Thorndike (1923) outlined a “scientific” model for learning premised on the notion that education consists of a set body of knowledge to be transmitted from the all-knowing teacher to the unknowing student. This model, also known as the transmission model or the banking model of teaching and learning (Freire, 1993), currently underpins classroom teaching practices that include teaching scripts, curriculum pacing guides, and other mandated teaching activities (Au, 2007; Hawthorne, et al., 2012; Nelms, 2004; Sleeter & Stillman, 2005). The transmission view is also evident in legislation, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top, that focuses on standardized teaching practices and outcomes. Yet, the transmission model stands in stark contrast to sociocultural theories of learning espoused by learning theorists (e.g., Bruner, 1986; Vygotsky, 1962; Vygotsky & Luria,
1994), educational theorists (e.g., Dewey, 1929, 2008; Gee, 1999; New London Group, 1996) and teacher educators (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 1991; Sleeter & Stillman, 2005). The tensions between these different views of teaching and learning create multiple challenges for teachers.

In this study, I investigate how English language arts (ELA) teachers negotiate the tensions between the teaching practices that promote student learning and those practices perpetuated by legislation. In a time in which immense pressure is placed upon both teachers and students for students to perform well on high stakes tests in reading and writing, it is crucial to understand how ELA teachers resist classroom constraints to provide effective literacy instruction for students.

**Theoretical Perspective**

Over time, perceptions of what “literacy” is and what it means to be “literate” have fluctuated. Far from a static concept, definitions and configurations of literacy are in constant flux as people, society, culture, and technology change. Early considerations of literacy were relatively narrow in scope and were primarily focused on a limited view of literacy relating only to reading and writing. This conception characterizes literacy as a set of discrete skills that are developed in a linear process, over time, within an individual (Gee, 1999; Kutz, 1997; Lytle, 2001; Street, 2001). In contrast to the transmission model, a sociocultural view of literacy and learning recognizes the impact of various tools or technologies and society on literacy.

The New Literacy Studies, for example, purports a configuration of literacy that takes into account the complex interactions between people, culture, society, texts, and power. Defined by Street (2001) as the ideological model, this conception of literacy contrasts with a model of literacy as linear process for acquiring a discrete set of skills by the individual (Szwed, 2001), a process referred to as the autonomous model (Street, 2001). The shift means that literacy can no
longer be considered as something learned in a vacuum. Instead, ideations and teachings of literacy have to take into account people’s backgrounds, knowledge, experiences, cultures, languages, values, beliefs, texts, relationships to people, and relationships to power (Gee, 1999; Farr, 2001; Heath, 2001; Kutz, 1997; Lytle, 2001; Moll & Gonzalez, 2001; O’Brien, Stewart, & Beach, 2009; Scribner & Cole, 2001; Street, 2001).

**Resistant Teaching: A Conceptual Framework**

The term “resistant teaching” is not one applied throughout the literature but instead is a term generated as a framework for talking about teaching that resists transmission models promoted by legislation. Cochran-Smith (1991) asserts that teachers who work against the grain are “creators and interpreters of curriculum, not just its implementers” (p. 306). This kind of teaching looks very different from the traditional banking model (Freire, 1993) and an autonomous, skill-based model (Gee, 1999; Kutz, 1997; Lytle, 2001; Street, 2001) of literacy teaching and learning. In short, resistant teaching involves teachers recognizing learning as a social process drawing upon student knowledge in planning lessons that allow students to engage with a variety of texts, perspectives, and activities that promote effective literacy practices. More specifically, resistant teaching involves examining how teachers engage in these practices in light of the restrictive mandates they face in their day-to-day classroom practice, including the following practices which serve as a preliminary framework for participant selection:

- Developing lessons in response to student background knowledge
- Using varied texts, including media and pop culture, to explore diverse perspectives and experiences
- Promoting students as a community of learners through discussion, debate, dialogue, and collaboration
• Presenting students with complex, authentic learning experiences that are connected to real world experiences, require higher order thinking, and bridge academic and everyday literacies

• Initiating possibilities for students to explore issues of power, privilege, inequity, injustice, and discrimination

The extent to which teachers apply resistant teaching practices depends upon their contexts. Even in the most restrictive environments, resistant teachers attempt to balance accepted or approved modes with alternatives to do what is best for students while avoiding placing themselves at risk (Cochran-Smith, 1991). Comber (2001, p. 273) argues that, even under the most stringent restraints, “there is room to move.” Resistant teachers find a way.

Methods

Guided by a constructionist epistemology, this study uses collective case study methodology (Stake, 2000) to understand the experiences of ELA teachers who engage in resistant teaching and their resistance to mandates evolved through exploring participants’ classroom practices. A case has been constructed for each participant and followed by a cross-case analysis. Data include teacher interviews, classroom observations, and documents/artifacts related to curriculum and teaching. Data were analyzed utilizing narrative analysis (for interviews) (Riesmann, 2003; Sprague, 2005) and inductive domain analysis (for observations and documents/artifacts) (Hatch, 2002).

Data Sources

Participants

Participants for this study included four secondary ELA teachers (1 middle school, 3 high school) teaching in north central Florida: Jasmine is in her fifth year teaching 9th grade at a very
diverse P-12 lab school; Jill is in her fifth year at a suburban middle school; Libby is in her sixth year at a predominantly African American high school teaching Advanced Placement (AP) courses; and Jeremy is in his sixth year at a rural high school teaching in the Cambridge program. Purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to select participants based on five criteria: graduated from a shared graduate-level teacher education program, recommended by professors from that program, met criteria for resistant teaching, are successful within their contexts, and indicated constraints felt from local, state, and/or federal policies.

Data Collection

Data collection took place from January to April 2013 and included interviews, classroom observations, and collection of documents and artifacts pertaining to their teaching.

Interviews

Initial interviews were semi-structured and open-ended to garner information and stories about each participant’s background, teaching experiences, descriptions of teaching practices, successes and challenges, and reflections. For the two subsequent interviews, guiding questions were informed by classroom observations and previous interviews. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Classroom Observations

Classroom observations were conducted to see the teachers’ practices and instances of resistant teaching, examine how the teachers interact with their students in the classroom, and provide greater context for interview data. These observations contributed to the thick description for the cases.

Documents and Artifacts
For this study, documents or artifacts consisted primarily of materials or texts the teacher utilized for a lesson (e.g., teacher-made textbooks, assignments, lesson plans).

**Findings**

Data analysis is still in process. Preliminary analysis has yielded several themes across the teachers’ experiences that highlight resistant teaching practices that contribute to their success despite their varying contexts.

**Challenges/Constraints**

One striking thing they all had in common was in talking about their challenges/constraints. Every teacher expressed that their challenges stemmed mostly from issues with administration, bureaucratic requirements, or other teachers. Jeremy and Libby added that parents/families/community were also a challenge. But not one teacher mentioned students as being a challenge/constraint. That is not to say that they didn’t indicate that they had challenges with students, but they didn’t indicate that challenges with students impeded their ability to function as a teacher, whereas other challenges/constraints created complications or roadblocks in their teaching practice.

Testing was an oft-cited constraint. Universally, they expressed that students were over-tested, certain curriculum requirements were test-driven, and high expectations existed for students to succeed on testing even when support was absent. However, these teachers found ways to balance best practices and test preparation. Test preparation was isolated as just that and was often a subtle part of, rather than a guiding factor in, their curricula.

**Curriculum and Instruction**

All four teachers continued to draw upon the practices and principles from their teacher education program, which is situated in sociocultural views of literacy and learning. Their
curriculum was rigorous and provided students with opportunities to explore diverse literature and perspectives, engage with media and popular culture, understand and utilize different forms of language for different purposes, participate as a community of learners (e.g., discuss, debate, dialog, collaborate), connect their learning to real world contexts, and explore issues related to inequity and injustice. Their curriculum was constructed and adapted with student needs and interests in mind.

**Classroom Management**

Indicated via interviews and observations, these teachers had very few behavior problems in their classrooms. While classroom management styles varied, all were premised upon students as thinking, feeling human beings. Students in the classes were generally respectful and attentive, and they participated in classroom activities.

**Self-selected Isolation/Peer Groups**

All four teachers commented about the divide amongst teachers at their schools. They talked about those they congregate with as opposed to those they tend to avoid, except when not possible (e.g., faculty or department meetings). Libby was the most isolated, functioning largely as an island. She typically kept to herself, staying in her classroom to work with students during lunch and leaving right after school. Others talked about working relationships developed with other faculty members sought out in an effort to maintain a positive, supportive working environment.

**Self-Motivated Professional Growth/Development**

Rather than merely attending district professional development workshops, they seek out more in terms of their professional growth: Jeremy loads up on research and professional development materials during summers and presented at a national conference; Jill seeks out HS
teachers at district PD events in order to help prepare her 8th graders for HS; Libby reads NCTE publications and has done her own AP research/study online. Jasmine received paid time to participate in a large, voluntary, interdisciplinary project involving Common Core.

Connections to University/Professional Community

All four teachers have maintained some kind of connections with the university or developing professional community. Jill, Libby, and Jasmine host practicum students and interns in their classrooms. Jasmine partners with one program professor in a writing project between her students and pre-service teachers. Jeremy has mentored teachers new to the county, including pre-service and first-year teachers. The connections to the university/professional community reflect underlying attitudes about teaching and learning.

Additional Roles

In addition to their titles as English teachers, these teachers fulfill multiple roles. They are also mentors, (assistant) team leaders, (unofficial) department heads, extracurricular coaches/organizers/leaders, and professional development leaders. This commitment beyond the immediate classroom setting is indicative of a greater commitment to students, schools, and the profession.

Scholarly Significance

This study is relevant to the field in two key ways. First, it examines the concept of resistant teaching against the background of contemporary educational politics. With Race to the Top, NCLB, and Common Core, teachers today are on shifting sands that may profoundly impact how they teach. Second, this study holds important implications for English teacher education.
For English teacher educators, this study suggests ways to support pre-service teachers as they enter the field. Many teacher educators feel stymied by how to approach or respond to “the eager faces of our preservice teachers, knowing the multiple challenges they will face when they enter the classroom” (Hawthorne et al., 2012, p. 306). This study sheds light on ways teacher educators can support pre-service teachers in developing or sustaining teaching orientations to successfully negotiate constraints faced in practice.

Moreover, Moje (2007) suggests that educational scholars need to understand how subject area teachers conceive of literate processes and practice in their subject and what they think about when planning opportunities for teaching and learning literacy. This study responds to that call.
References


