

Discourse of denial

Shirley Brice Heath
Stanford University

Those of us who study learning and socialization practices that surround oral and written language constantly hear policymakers and practitioners in education call for “more research.” Implied within such pleas is the view that “best practices” for improving achievement, developing innovative effective learning environments, and making knowledge from a host of fields available for decision making will or even “should” come from research. Closely attached to calls for more research, particularly in the field of literacy learning, is promotion of the idea that collecting information from the targeted population for reading and writing instruction will lead to improved teaching methods and materials.

This essay illustrates through two cases the linguistic means that policymakers and educators often use to deflect, ignore, or twist research results and target-population data sources. The first case revolves around the recent and unexpected thrust into the policy world of my research on out-of-school learning environments, especially those centered in the arts. That research, carried out for more than a decade in regions across the United States, has centered on three questions: What parts of organized learning environments do participants regard as positive and desirable? How does language socialization take place here? What strategies of interaction, collaboration, and planful behavior are evidenced within these environments?

The second case draws from work I did in the summer of 2000 in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. I worked there with linguists and literacy workers who were attempting to determine ways to bring literacy more meaningfully into the lives of villagers living in remote areas of the country. In many of these regions, multinational corporations are closing in rapidly to extract natural resources—particularly diamonds, gold, oil, and timber. The harm being done to the environment can no longer be tracked or measured because the pace is so rapid and the devastation so intense and unrelenting. My role during my time there was to listen to villagers, linguists, and literacy workers and to help them think through possible answers to the following questions (among others): What languages, genres, and styles of information presentation are villagers most likely to use in making communal decisions about their environmental resources? What are the local practices of interaction that surround the inclusion of written information into

decision-making routines that otherwise are primarily oral and visual (e.g., through the use of symbols other than those of print—maps, landmarks, etc.)?

Learning in the Arts

The development of my search for effective learning environments beyond the family and school came about through continuation of my study of families of Trackton and Roadville (Heath 1983). I have followed 300 of these families for more than thirty years, and it has become increasingly clear that changes in family structures and pressures on classroom life have created, for most young people of the United States, a trajectory of language socialization that differs radically from that assumed by child language scholars and developmental psychologists. Young people beyond the age of eight spend very little time engaged in project-based or planful learning opportunities with their parents, and classrooms that are pushed to teach to standardized test performance leave little time for sustained project-based learning. School districts increasingly cut budgets for arts and shop classes during the school day, as well as for extracurricular after-school activities such as theatre or dance. Hence the grandchildren and children of the families of Roadville and Trackton grow up in environments dominated by peer experiences and popular culture. With entertainers such as Britney Spears, Little Bow Wow, and the Spice Girls and chain compact disc, video, and fashion stores racing to enlist eight- to twelve-year-olds (now called “the betwixt” or “tweens”) as consumers, shopping malls or other public spaces for display have become key language socialization contexts. Neither adult mentors nor long-term plans and productive engagement mark these learning environments.

Vying with these spaces are the relatively few youth-centered organizations that can match the appeal of “hanging out,” “doing nothing,” or “just being with my friends.” Through a process of exemplary sampling over a decade, I sought out many of these organizations in the United States and England and, with a team of young anthropologists, recorded and observed how they operated as learning environments. Although these community organizations included athletic-academic teams, as well as community service groups, the grouping I focus on here includes only arts-based organizations. All of these organizations, however, reflected several common features. They operate as places of high risk that engage young people in tasks that challenge and responsibilities that are real. All of the organizations create learning environments that depend on young people across an age range (generally from eight to eighteen) who take on roles and responsibilities that are essential to the life of the group. Youth members work on budget planning as well as building security concerns; they design sets for theatre and plan team travel. Young people in these groups find themselves immersed in situations that force them to ask “what if?” or “how about?” or “just in case...?”

Organizations of this type that offer the highest risk—because they depend on pursuit of the imagination, the conditional, the possible—invariably are those

devoted to the arts: dance, theatre, visual or graphic arts, creative writing, or music. These organizations move young people through planning, preparing, and practicing toward a performance, exhibition, or production, followed by evaluation. Through all of these stages, critique figures heavily, as young artists question one another on the meaning, process, and intention of their work. In addition, these organizations ensure continual contact by the young members with professional artists, who lead the young artists through critique and hold them to high expectations.

I have written elsewhere about the ways in which these organizations scaffold young members as they take on highly responsible roles that emphasize thinking, planning, being accountable, looking ahead, and reflecting well on the group. Mental state verbs, modals, conditionals, and complex hypothetical proposals of all sorts pepper the talk of youths who take part in such organizations. These structures become part of the habitual talk of young people, who spend approximately ten hours per week over thirty to forty-two weeks in at least one year of sustained involvement within their organizations (Heath, Soep, and Roach 1998; Heath and Smyth 2000; Heath and Roach 1999). Syntactic structures and inclusion of references to sources outside the individual experience characterize language development of these young people. Developing an ease of production with these structures enables young people to take part in group planning, self-monitoring to think about the future, and expecting to evaluate a process and its outcomes. Young people actively engage with the full organizational environment, take part in a temporal arc of effort, and bring intrinsic motivation to their activities within their youth organization (Larson 2000). Not surprisingly, the confidence, habits of thinking, and ways of speaking they develop there become part of their self-representation within other contexts, such as school, peer groups, and family settings.

Along with this context of language socialization, arts organizations depend heavily on the growth and development of skills associated with numeracy and financial record management and reporting, such as estimating, calculating, balancing alternative decisions, and justifying expenditures. Writing across a variety of genres—from grants to public relations to theatre program notes to history and biography—also advances confidence and fluency in language use. Repeated practice of these skills results from the fact that young people take on major and minor tasks that keep the organization going and account for its successes and failures. Often these groups devote some of their effort to entrepreneurial activities that bring in some funding to sustain the organization (Heath and Smyth 2000).

It is no surprise that such learning in the arts, even for young people at highest risk from a host of social and economic factors, helps engender and reinforce strong value orientations toward community commitment, social equity, academic achievement, and seeking knowledge from a variety of sources, written, experiential, and personal (Heath and Roach 1999). It also is no surprise that in terms

of strategic planning and weighing of consequences the young people intensively involved in the arts organizations of the type described here expect a great deal of themselves and feel accountable for their actions.

Denial of Possibilities

What is surprising, however, is that educators and policymakers—as well as funders—actively deny the possibilities and promise of creating learning environments of this sort. Even though educators frequently call for research to show when and how high-risk young people learn, they deny the idea that what happens within community youth organizations can complement and supplement school learning or merit consideration in teacher education or classroom reform. Neither statistical evidence comparing the young people of these organizations with those of the National Education Longitudinal Survey nor long-term qualitative contextual and linguistic research leads educators, policymakers, or funders to a sense of probability. The following comments characterize their responses.

Come on, there are teachers who do just this kind of thing in their classrooms. Just the other day, I visited a school where three teachers were combining their classes across history, English, and civics for the students to create a dramatic reading. I see the sort of thing your youth organizations do every day in the schools I visit. This kind of stuff does not have to take place after school; it's already happening within schools.

What you're talking about will take away from schools; that's where all of America's kids are, and that's where we have to put our efforts and our resources. The kind of thing you want seems to me to be the responsibility of the parents. Why, when I was a kid, everybody got carted somewhere after school every day to do something, and parents today know how important these after-school activities are. Look at how karate clubs are thriving, and little girls still do ballet and gymnastics, don't they? You don't think for one minute, do you, that any kid is going to get into any decent college today without the extracurricular, do you?

But the kids you found had to be special. You can't tell me these are your run-of-the mill kids from inner cities. In their cases, some kind of magic happened—they were just in the right place at the right time with the right person in charge of some after-school group. These kinds of kids would have made it even without these organizations.

These responses illustrate four strategies for denying research findings. First is “narrative avoidance,” in which the respondent simply provides an engaging narrative that is intended to dispute or disprove the claim of the research. In this tactic, one apparent “counter case” is sufficient to set aside research findings that are based on dozens of organizations in various regions of the country. Counterexamples follow the belief system—and, even more important, the categorizing framework—held by those who deny research evidence. Narratives that are most effective at avoiding engagement with the findings are marked by at least four stylistic maneuvers:

- Use of diminutive descriptors to refer to components of research findings: *sort of, kind of stuff, this kind of thing*
- Assertion of speaker authority as agent of knowing and seeing contrary evidence: *when I was a kid, I see, I visited*
- Attribution to researcher of overdrawn or unreasonable claims: *what you’re talking about will take away...; you can’t tell me these are your run-of-the mill kids....*
- Transfer of research from the groups involved in the study to other, unrelated groups: *you don’t think for one minute...decent colleges today*

In addition to the use of avoidance narratives, many rebuttals or denials reflect a second characteristic of denial discourse: assertion of dichotomies that do not exist.

American educators hold strongly to dichotomies for reasons that lie deep within what may be called “companion comparatives.” Terms such as “God and country,” “family and school,” “either in or out, for or against,” and “either right or wrong” typify public discourse, as well as explanations that authorities give to young people about rules or moral beliefs to guide their behavior. The duo of “family and school” as primary socializing forces for children and young people has no place for beliefs or category labels for community youth organizations that give young people real responsibilities for management and development. There is no companion comparative for communities as learning agents or contexts.

Moreover, people who refuse to accept research findings on positive learning consequences from the participation of young people in activities outside the control of family or school are aided by the fact that there is no fixed label or identifiable agent for the time when young people are not in school, except terms such as *nonschool* or *out-of-school*. My research has tried to plant the term *community-based* within the field of developmental psychology as well as anthropology, but this idea has not taken root. Hence, because what I describe is seen as *nonschool* or *out-of-school*, the findings from the research inevitably become set *against* schools. This third strategy sets up the research findings on learning as

somehow critical of or oppositional to schools. If assertions are made that learning is taking place *outside* of schools through creation of certain kinds of contexts and activities, the implication must be that these positive forces do not or cannot operate *inside* schools.

A final feature of denial discourse on the topic of learning within community contexts springs from the fact that those legitimated by credentials or degrees from formal education regard other types of learning as inherently non-categorizable and hence irrational and chaotic. Thus, American educators rarely take seriously agents, contexts, or conditions of learning that are not guided or directed by formal instruction. Whereas the research community, as well as educators, in other postindustrial nations (most notably Canada and England) engage systematically with lifelong learning, expert learning through retraining, professional training, and development within job settings, U.S. scholars of learning and policymakers do not regard such learning as linked to K–12 or even postsecondary schooling. Other than early childhood studies, second-language acquisition research, or examination of rehabilitation (e.g., of delinquents, convicted criminals, drug- or alcohol-addicted individuals), developmental research has given almost no attention to how learning takes place beyond highly specific formal educational contexts. Terms that apply to such situations invariably fall into patterns of category-assignment that carry negative connotations—for example, “adult education,” “rehabilitation,” or “retraining.” In all of these cases, the labels suggest a failure to have “gotten it right” in earlier education during the K–16 years and therefore the need for a “second go” at being educated appropriately.

Reflecting on the kinds of learning habits and orientation to new knowledge and skills that young people gain when they are learning, playing, or working on their own would mean taking seriously not only “informal” or “nonformal” learning (note again the dichotomous labeling) but also the massive training and development industry that the United States and other postindustrial nations use to ensure a ready workforce. The annual budget for such work can exceed that of public schooling, but educators and developmentalists pay little or no attention to this industry, which is largely responsible for ongoing or lifelong learning. On the other hand, business interests—from managers to advertisers—focus intently on learning that goes on outside formal instruction and generally through goals linked to learning for improved work, leisure, health, or human relations. Spaces such as shopping malls or modes of transport, as well as locations of medical services, are devoted largely to promoting learning that is not school-based but complements, influences, and supplements formal educational achievements in numerous ways. Yet educators remain so tied to a semantic web in which “education” links almost exclusively to school, classroom, teacher, curriculum, formal education, and K–16 that they find it difficult to construct learning beyond this web.

Making Literacy Meaningful for Communities

In Papua New Guinea (PNG) in the summer of 2000, village representatives from several communities along the Sepik River met in the highlands with linguists and literacy “experts” to talk about the role of written language(s) in their communities. A group of Angor men from a Sepik village near the Irian Jaya border came to report on their struggle to convince villagers not to allow a multinational corporation to cut the timber in their area in return for a one-time payment that the men realized was far below the actual value of the resource. Moreover, based on the experience of other villages, these men knew that erosion and other detrimental effects on the life of the remote community would follow after communal division of the one-time cash payment. These men, all of whom had some literacy skills, instead wanted to have a portable sawmill in their own village, following the example of a distant village that had successfully established a thriving sawmill run by local men.

In the course of several meetings among literacy workers, linguists, educators, and village representatives, I asked the men to describe just how written materials could figure in their efforts to save their village timber from multinationals and to start a local sawmill on their own. My hope was that such questions from a “white skin” outsider would enable the men to explain to expatriates and nationals involved in literacy instruction their village practices around external sources of information. I particularly wanted them to make clear to everyone present which languages, for which uses, they depended on in their efforts to persuade other villagers not to take the ready-cash offer of multinational corporations. These men identified fully with their village, but they also knew that edicts came from Port Moresby, the nation’s capital, and the bureaucracies there. I elaborated my question by asking them also about the uses of oral languages that had gone into their deliberations.

I asked them to describe “all the pieces of paper, all the pieces of writing that have come through your plans so far...[what are] the many kinds of reading and writing you have had to do.” Robert Litteral, a linguist (whom the villagers referred to as Bob) who had worked in the area for decades, translated my questions into either the local language or Tok Pisin, the *lingua franca* known to all of these village members, and one of the men responded in Tok Pisin:

Ismoe: It is like I said before. Bob went to Moresby and he got the pamphlet from the Environment Conservation [Commission?] and brought it back. This council teaches how about things [connected to the environment] and how to look after the money of sawmill businesses. I read all these things and I had an idea. I already was thinking that I would like to do a similar business in my village, so later I went back to the village and talked with the other three neighboring villages.

Litteral then repeated my question about their talk: “When you went and talked with all the people in the other villages, how did you go about that? What did you do? Did you stand up and talk, sit down and talk, for a short time, once or several times? Did you go yourselves or did others go? OK, when you went, how did you create interest in the idea or talk with people about this idea?”

Ismoe: Yes, well, to do this I did not stand up and just talk, we did it in our ways. We sat down with some of the big men of the village, and some of the younger men came too. And we tried to find out the thinking. We pooled our thinking together and we talked with them all. And some of the big men were there listening, and they were in agreement with our thinking. We didn’t stand and talk; no, we sat down at the regular meeting place near one of the houses in the shade and we talked with everyone.

Litteral expanded:

When the Local Government Council was going on, the people went to the council meeting, and they came back. Then they met with everyone at the village. They were in the village and spoke about things they had heard at the council meeting, and people responded to the talk about it. So they talked about it in the village, sitting down. They didn’t stand up like learned or knowledgeable men and teach others.

Subsequent discussion revealed that the men had read brochures written in Tok Pisin and talked over the meaning of the brochures in Tok Pisin with officials in Port Moresby. When they returned to their own village, however, they spoke in their local language at the Council and in related informal meetings. The men agreed that because some of their villagers could read the native language, having brochures in their language would have helped. They went on to acknowledge, however, that they knew that their own recordkeeping, reports, and documentation supporting their local sawmill and rejecting the offer of the multinational corporation would need to be in English. For this material, the village would be dependent on one of their members who had become a teacher and received a diploma from a teacher’s college.

Some nationals from other locations, such as Western Highlands Province, added to the account by the Angor men of how information moved across languages and means (oral, written, mapped, and “walked”—as in walking the property lines by use of landmarks designating boundaries). Rambai Keruwa, from the Kaugel community, noted that he could attribute his reading development not only to influential and supportive teachers in his local village school but also to

having seen an adult man bring reading materials to the village and talk by reference to them. The man read and talked in English; Keruwa decided that he would do the same, realizing that through English he would have access to new information. Within his village, people who are literate read on their own and then orally pass on the information they have gained. To read aloud or display one's reading abilities in public—except for designated institutional individuals, such as teachers and pastors—is to bring shame to others who may not be able to read. Similarly, reading while engaged in a conversational setting within the village would not be tolerated or even useful because reading aloud becomes a performance in which readers and listeners cannot gain meaning at the same time. Keruwa emphasized, “People are more comfortable if the presenter reads the information in his or her own time, digests it, and then explains, in their own ways, the information that they want the people to know about.” In short, there is more credibility in discussing, explaining, and interpreting something than in just reading from a page. Thus, knowing “how to read” within a village means knowing how to interpret reading within talk that conforms to local norms of interaction, respect, and validation.

The linguists, educators, and literacy “experts” present—many of whom were expatriates—found that these first-hand accounts challenged two primary ends of both school instruction and adult literacy teaching: the value of reading aloud and otherwise displaying one's reading skills in public arenas. They asked questions such as, “But is what these men refer to as they describe uses of reading and writing really ‘literacy,’ or is it something else like development?” “How does this kind of work by a learner relate to our tasks as literacy instructors of individual learners?” Preparation as a literacy worker or educator emphasizes the importance of having individuals show their ability to read orally—a means by which the teacher gains control over knowledge about the quality and level of decoding skills of the reader.

The villagers (all of whom were literate in two or three languages—Tok Pisin, the local language, and/or English) made clear that a wide range of texts in several languages could be made accessible to villagers, as long as oral patterns of information transmission were honored. Helped by representatives from other villages across Papua New Guinea, the men developed a list of types of texts (from forestry brochures to instructions for ordering parts for the sawmill) and the preferred language(s) for each, as well as arenas for oral transmittal of information (e.g., within the Local Council or informal meetings).

Strongly evident was the fact that uses of written language can (and probably will) remain broad. Moreover, information from written sources will become available to many villagers if a few knowledge brokers from each village can successfully meet local oral transmission norms. Reading *per se* is likely to remain a largely covert, rather than overt, literacy practice in PNG villages until more opportunities to learn to read in local languages are available. Of special import

to educators, linguists, and literacy workers (particularly those accustomed to promoting reading aloud within church services or council meetings) was the revelation that the range of texts being accessed by villagers who can read is broad. Moreover, readers find ways to share written information with their extended family, the village, and sometimes other villages as well. The range of these types of texts shared in these ways surpassed in number and variety those of non-PNG members of the group, who found it difficult to admit that most of their reading was individual and not shared or distributed to others by word of mouth. For PNG villages, the texts shared in almost all situations would not be present during talk about the texts, whereas on some occasions the actual presence of the written material would amount to validation, but no one would read aloud.

None of this information about ways that different societies make use of literacy is new. For several decades, scholars have illustrated a host of ways that communities transfer, transform, and complement information that comes in written forms. Much of this research draws from first-hand accounts by readers of the ways in which oral language and other means of communication surround uses of written information. Yet belief systems instilled in training to be a literacy worker or teacher make denial of such accounts easy. Within Papua New Guinea and many other parts of the world, people who are most responsible for enabling villagers to learn to read find ways to dichotomize and to renarrativize local knowledge. They raise questions such as the following: If the ability of an individual reader to decode cannot be evidenced by overt public performance, is what is taking place actually *literacy*? Such overt oral transmission of knowledge from written material, particularly with regard to matters of importance to entire communities, seems to be something else—such as community development, public health, or environmental education—not *literacy*.

A second question that emerges is this: If someone is trained to teach and test for the acquisition of reading and writing skills, should the uses, retention, or expansion of these skills be of concern to the literacy instructor? Training to be a literacy worker or teacher instills the idea that these responsibilities should reside with the learner as an individual achiever. In other words, the transfer of individual literacy skills to the public arena seems to lie outside the purview or responsibility of literacy teachers. Yet, as was evident in the accounts given by the villagers, their individual acquisition of reading and writing skills through literacy instruction had taken root in their individual habits and had spread knowledge ultimately primarily through their oral skills. Complex strategies of summarizing, explaining, casting into future scenarios, and transforming into action were demanded of the literate because they could not simply read from a page or text to enable others to use written information.

International groups such as the World Health Organization, UNESCO, and the United Nations increasingly argue that raising the literacy level of the poorest nations of the world will enhance opportunities for regional development,

improved health, and sustained educational interests among the residents of those nations. The Papua New Guinea illustration indicates that the portability of literacy skills to any of these ends will spring inevitably from ensuring that individual readers also acquire highly complex strategies for using written information for communal transmission. Yet literacy workers and their trainers find it easy to deny that their responsibilities extend beyond ensuring decoding skills and individual performance of interpretation of reading abilities.

Final Comments

In both of the cases I discuss in this essay, the discourse of denial carries similar bases of rejection: Agents without legitimation by formal instruction or education institutions have assumed authority over learning. In the first case, parents, politicians, and public-school advocates overclaim benefits of the formal instruction of schools in the face of research findings that show the positive effects of other organized learning environments. In the second case, villagers took authority over their own learning to guide them to use their literacy skills in ways that were compatible with oral language habits and social norms of their region. When faced with this authoritative experience, “trained” literacy workers were led to question fundamental meanings of reading and writing as distinct from development work. The two cases illustrate the boundaries that education installs to keep out what Clifford Geertz calls “local knowledge” or “experience-near” understandings. Geertz warns:

To grasp concepts that, for another people, are *experience-near*, and to do so well enough to place them in illuminating connection with *experience-distant* concepts theorists have fashioned to capture the general features of social life, is clearly a task as delicate, if a bit less magical, as putting oneself into someone else’s skin (Geertz 1983: 58; emphasis added).

The “experience-distant” concepts that theorists “fashion” entail categories and expectations of learning processes that are not easily dislodged in spite of direct-experience accounts or research findings. It probably is fair to say that throughout human history, the learning that sticks by and for individuals has to come through as “experience-near.” Yet it remains extremely difficult for most people whose learning has been heavily filtered through institutional experience to acknowledge and appreciate the disassembled aspect of noncategorized learning contexts and agents. Institutional processes seem to work to implant discourses of denial that renarrativize and reaffirm the “experience-distant.” Such discourse rarely emerges into frontal assault on “experience-near” learning; instead, the discourse of denial works effectively to set aside, shelve, or ignore whatever challenges conceptual or categorical unity or methodological agree-

ment. Meanwhile, the truth and actualities of the seemingly off-hand, temporary movements toward learning illustrated in the two cases given here manage to maintain themselves and to fill institutional gaps. They remain to reflect environments and agents that no doubt will continue to sustain what may be the deepest and most central connection among people who are neither bound by nor bonded to institutions: the joint moral obligation to adaptation.

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