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978-0-521-60833-6 - Learning Identity: The Joint Emergence of Social Identification and Academic Learning

Stanton Wortham

Excerpt

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## 1

**Self/Knowledge**

In functioning classrooms, as paradigmatic sites of rational activity, we expect to find focused and productive cognitive processes. Irrational and irrelevant things happen in classrooms, of course, but when teachers and students are doing the primary business of schooling – reading, writing, discussing, experimenting, calculating – we expect to find subject matter, argument, evidence and academic learning. As more sociological and anthropological studies of classroom practice have been done over the past three or four decades, however, it has become clear that social identification, power relations, interpersonal struggles and other apparently non-academic processes also take place during the primary business of schooling (e.g., Cazden, John and Hymes, 1972; Gee, 1989; Varenne and McDermott, 1998). Furthermore, these apparently non-academic processes cannot easily be separated from the academic activities that go on in classrooms. Subject matter, argument, evidence and academic learning overlap with social identification, power relations and interpersonal struggles (e.g., Leander, 2002; Lemke, 1990; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, Lintz and Okamoto, 1996; Wortham, 1994).

Although many have pointed out the co-occurrence of academic and non-academic activities in classrooms, significant dispute remains about how to conceptualize relations between the two. Some continue to revel in demonstrations of non-academic activities in classrooms, claiming that ideologies of academic learning merely distract from the real social business of schooling. Some treat the two types of activities as concurrent but separate and continue to maintain that schooling is primarily about academic learning. More promising accounts have begun to explore the complex interrelations among academic and non-academic activities. This book describes one way in which academic and non-academic activities can overlap in classrooms. It focuses on social identification and academic learning, sketching an account of how these two processes can overlap and partly constitute each other. Through empirical analyses of social

identification and academic learning in one classroom over an academic year, the book shows how subject matter, argument, evidence and academic learning sometimes intertwine with and come to depend upon social identification, power relations and interpersonal struggles in classrooms.

STUDENTS AS BEASTS

On January 24, in their joint English and history class, Mrs. Bailey and Mr. Smith discussed Aristotle’s *Politics* with their ninth grade students. Aristotle argues that people who live outside society, who do not experience natural interdependence with others, are not fully human: “He who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be beast or god” (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a, line 29). This claim puzzles the late twentieth-century American students, who conceive of “humanness” as lodged in individuals’ agency and inalienable rights. In order to help the students understand Aristotle’s conception of human nature, the teachers give two examples. They imagine two students in the classroom as hypothetical “beasts,” and they discuss how these hypothetical beasts might differ from humans who live in society.

Early in the discussion, Mrs. Bailey singles out Maurice as a hypothetical beast. (“T/B” is Mrs. Bailey and “FST” is an unidentified female student. Transcription conventions, a list of classroom participants and a key to abbreviations are in the appendices.)

- 315    **T/B:**                    I mean think of what- he’s saying  
                                   there. he’s saying if Maurice went out and lived in  
                                   the woods (4.0) [some laughter]  
                                   **FST:** °they’re talking about you°  
                                   **T/B:** and never had any contact with the rest of us,  
 320    he would be- uh- like an animal.

With this example of Maurice, Mrs. Bailey uses the common pedagogical strategy of building an analogy between students’ actual or hypothetical experiences and the curricular topic. Such analogies make familiar concepts available to students as they develop their own models of curricular topics. Mrs. Bailey probably hopes that students will better understand Aristotle’s conception of human nature through a discussion of how Maurice the beast would differ from students who belong to society. Students’ experiences as members of productive groups – perhaps their understandings of collective goals or shared responsibilities – might help them understand why Aristotle believed humans to be essentially social. By imagining how Maurice’s dispositions and opportunities would be different if he lived apart from society, they might explore Aristotle’s view of humans who do not live up to their social nature. With substantially more discussion, the

example of Maurice the beast might contribute to students’ learning about Aristotle.

The teacher’s use of Maurice as an example may also help to socially identify him. Mrs. Bailey’s hypothetical example separates Maurice the beast from “the rest of us” – the teachers and other students who remain part of “society.” “The rest of us” are social beings, working together in society as Aristotle envisioned it. Maurice the beast does not participate in this society, living instead like an animal out “in the woods.” Did Mrs. Bailey choose Maurice for this role because he himself is separated from the rest of the class in some way? Is she implying that Maurice sometimes behaves like a “beast?” As described in Chapter 5, the teachers and the girls who dominate discussion in this classroom often exclude Maurice from classroom interactions. They also sometimes identify him as resisting school and as unlikely to succeed in later life. In this context, the discussion of Maurice as a beast may not be merely hypothetical. Teachers and students may be commenting on Maurice’s own social identity, as they draw a tacit analogy between his identity as a student excluded from classroom activities and his hypothetical role as a beast. Chapter 5 analyzes the “Maurice the beast” example in detail, showing how teachers and students do in fact use his hypothetical identity as a beast to reinforce Maurice’s own identity as an outcast from the classroom “society.”

Later in their discussion of Aristotle, the teachers and students switch from discussing Maurice to discussing Tyisha as a beast. Right before Tyisha enters the discussion, teachers and students have proposed that humans differ from beasts because humans have “goals.” Tyisha offers her cat as a counterexample, arguing that her cat has goals just as people do – for instance, trying to jump onto the counter. Mrs. Bailey then inserts Tyisha (TYI) into the example.

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T/B: let’s- let’s- let’s take what- (3.0) let’s take

what your cat’s doing that every day he sees that-

counter that he wants to get on, and every day when

he passes that counter he tries to get up there. that’s

a goal. ok[ay

FST: [yeah.
- 680

T/B: how is that different than your goal, the goal

that you might have had last night when you had

this reading, or

TYI: °I don’t know°

Here Mrs. Bailey again uses students’ own experiences to teach the curriculum. Aristotle distinguishes between uniquely human and other goals. Mrs. Bailey asks students to consider the differences between Tyisha’s goals

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and her cat's goals. By exploring the differences between Tyisha and her cat, perhaps the students can better understand Aristotle's distinction between humans and beasts.

As the discussion continues, this seems to happen.

**FST:** humans can do more things than cats can do, like they can build

**TYI:** no that's not- just a goal. my goal is to win in Nintendo and

695 [laughter by a few girls in the class]

**FST:** that's your goal?

**TYI:** it's a go:al, so

**T/B:** okay maybe winning at Nintendo is like your cat's goal of getting on top of the-

700 **TYI:** right

**T/B:** the- the counter. but aren't- don't we have more [long=

**FST:** [better

**T/B:** =ranged goals than your cat getting on

705 top of the counter, or you winning Nintendo?

Acknowledging Tyisha's valid argument that humans have some beast-like goals, Mrs. Bailey distinguishes between two types of human goals: uniquely human ones and more instrumental goals that we share with other species. As they pursue it in subsequent discussion (analyzed in Chapter 4), this distinction seems to help students understand something about Aristotle's account of human nature.

This discussion also has implications for Tyisha's social identity. In arguing that her goals are the same as her cat's, Tyisha describes herself as having the intellectually and morally uninspiring goal of winning Nintendo video games. This provides teachers and students an opportunity: in addition to addressing her argument about goals, they go on to criticize and tease Tyisha herself for having beast-like goals. Right before the next segment, Mr. Smith tries to convince Tyisha that she has uniquely human goals, like the desire to get up in the morning, get to school and pursue her education. Tyisha then tries to undermine the distinction between uniquely human and beast-like goals.

**T/S:** so you had goals even before you s[tarted

**TYI:** [but not in

735 the summertime. I just got up, see, just like

**T/S:** ah, and in summertime when you got up because you had to come to school, what was your goal or was it to sleep until three in the afternoon? or to get up and play with your friends?

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**TYI:** the same goal my cat had, to go to sleep,  
and get up and eat.  
**T/B:** ahhh, isn't that interes [ting? [increase in pitch,  
"mocking" effect]  
**T/S:** [ahhhh  
745 **T/B:** same goals as her (1.0) [cat=  
**FST:** [cat had  
**T/B:** =had. wow.  
**FST:** so you are like an animal.  
**T/B:** so you are like an animal.

The teachers and students use their discussion of beasts and goals to tease Tyisha here. They imply that the rest of us have both uniquely human and beast-like goals, while Tyisha has mostly beast-like goals. The full analysis of this discussion in Chapter 4 will show, however, that the teachers and students are not simply teasing. By this point in the year they habitually exclude Tyisha and identify her as less promising than other students. When they identify Tyisha as a beast in this example, they reinforce her social identity as an outcast in the classroom.

These brief segments by themselves did not establish anything definite about Tyisha and Maurice’s social identities, nor did they allow students to learn key concepts from the curriculum. But the detailed analyses in Chapters 4 and 5 will show that, together with other discussions, the examples of Tyisha and Maurice as beasts did contribute both to identifying these two students socially and to helping some students learn about the curriculum. Over several months, both Tyisha and Maurice were themselves identified as “beasts” of a sort – as students excluded from the core group of cooperative students and considered less likely to succeed in school. Over several months students also learned about the curricular issue of what “beasts” or social outcasts are, and about how different intellectual traditions have conceived the appropriate relation between individuals and society.

The examples of Tyisha and Maurice as beasts contributed both to social identification and to academic learning. Students and teachers used the examples to reinforce Tyisha and Maurice’s social identities as outcasts in the classroom. At the same time, they used the examples to explore and ultimately to learn something about Aristotle’s distinction between humans and beasts. These examples show how both processes can go on simultaneously in classrooms. The rest of the book looks in detail at Tyisha, Maurice, their teachers and their classmates over an academic year, in order to explore how these students’ social identities overlap with the subject matter they learned. To frame the problem initially, it will be easier to conceive of separate processes – social identification and academic learning – that occur simultaneously and interconnect. As the book proceeds, however, I will argue that it is more productive to reconstrue social

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identification and academic learning as inseparable parts of more general processes.

#### MAKING UP PEOPLE, LOCALLY

Chapters 4 and 5 trace the identity development of Tyisha and Maurice in Mrs. Bailey and Mr. Smith's classroom over the academic year. The analyses show how both students were sometimes identified as "beasts" or outcasts in the classroom. It took many events of identification, across several months. But eventually Tyisha was routinely identified as a disruptive outcast, as someone who had rejected the teachers' authority and who had given up on the promised benefits of schooling. Maurice also came to be identified – although only sometimes, and only partially – as an outcast who refused to join the teachers and the cooperative students in their academic community. Thus Tyisha and Maurice *enacted* the analogy between their hypothetical behavior in the examples and Aristotle's account of society. In the classroom itself these two students were identified as beasts who allegedly refused to follow the rules of classroom "society."

Based on this brief sketch of Tyisha and Maurice's emerging identities, it may look as if they were being stereotyped based on their race. Both were African American students in an urban public school classroom at the end of the twentieth century. Although teachers and students did not use these terms, Tyisha became in some respects like the "loud black girls," and Maurice became in some respects like the "resistant black males" described by Signithia Fordham and others (1996; Anderson, 1999; Fordham and Ogbu, 1986). In the examples of Tyisha and Maurice as beasts on January 24, teachers and students did in fact draw on widely circulating models of identity that involve race – models that label some African American students as more likely to reject mainstream institutions like school – as they identified these two students as outcasts. But we will see that these racial models do not by themselves explain what happened to Tyisha and Maurice. These widely circulating sociohistorical models only contributed to the students' social identities as they were mediated through more specific local models of identity.

#### Denaturalizing Models of Identity

By "model of identity" I mean either an explicit account of what some people are like, or a tacit account that analysts can infer based on people's systematic behavior toward others. Models of identity develop historically. "Loud black girls," "resistant black males" and "disruptive students" can be intelligibly used as categories of identity only by some groups of people at specific sociohistorical moments. Hacking (1990) describes how such models and categories of identity emerge over decades and centuries.

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During the nineteenth century in Europe, for instance, it became possible to conceive of people as “normal” and “deviant” in new ways. As the concept of probability emerged and was applied to people, it became routine to classify individuals as normal or deviant along various dimensions. Bureaucracies arose to gather and tabulate statistics on different types of people – focusing especially on deviance like suicide, crime and prostitution – and it became natural to categorize some people as deviant in ways that had not been possible earlier. Before the concept of probability was developed, there had been “human nature,” and aberrations from it, but not normals and deviants along bureaucratically and scientifically established dimensions. Afterwards, both laypersons and experts had available what Hacking calls new “human kinds,” new models of identity to apply to each other. Hacking argues that societies “make up people” as they develop models, categories and technologies for social identification.

Foucault (1966/1971; 1975/1977) offers a similar analysis, in some respects, showing how models of identity and institutionalized practices of identification developed over the last few centuries in Europe. He traces a larger historical shift – from identifying people based on their behaviors to classifying and disciplining them according to their mental and spiritual dispositions – and he describes how institutionalized technologies for classification developed, first in the church and then in government. He shows how schools, for instance, developed elaborate classifications of students as promising, normal, resistant, impaired and the like – classifications that have been institutionalized in grading practices, in disciplinary procedures, in the spatial arrangement of students in classrooms and through other techniques. He also describes how the social sciences have been crucial in developing classifications of identity that bureaucrats employ and that laypeople apply to themselves and others. Foucault would agree with Hacking that, after this historical shift, we are able to identify deviants in ways that had not been possible before. Foucault adds a more detailed and more menacing account of the practices of surveillance through which institutions and people now monitor themselves and others for deviance.

By providing compelling historical accounts of how models of identity emerge over decades and centuries, Hacking and Foucault denaturalize what seem to be inevitable ways of identifying people. Of course, it seems to us, there are deviants. Surely all societies have had people exhibiting non-normative desires, behaviors and attitudes. But Hacking and Foucault show how, although there may always have been people we would call deviants, those in other places and times have identified such people using very different models of personhood. There has not always been a concept of the human “norm,” defined in probabilistic terms. There have not always been bureaucracies and social sciences to provide categories for sorting individuals and pathologizing some of them. There have not

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always been processes of surveillance, in which institutions and individuals make visible the normativity or deviance of their behavior.

I will pursue Hacking and Foucault's denaturalizing argument further than they do. Models of identity are contingent not only at the level of sociohistorical epochs, but also at more local levels. We must explore the local "spaces" (Blommaert, Collins, and Slembrouck, 2004) and shorter "timescales" (Lemke, 2000) in which widespread practices and categories get contextualized. Although Hacking and Foucault acknowledge that models of identity are not uniformly applied across contexts, their analyses present contemporary European-influenced society as if we have now adopted the models of identity that they describe. They do describe widespread ways of thinking and acting, of course, ones that are becoming even more widespread through media and other globalizing technologies. But, as Agha (in press) argues, models of identity always have a "social domain." Models of identity spread over time and space, through many types of events, but even the most widespread are only used by a particular subset of people in a given and time place. Furthermore, models of identity change as they move across time and space, and they are applied in contingent, sometimes unpredictable ways in actual events of identification.

Just as Hacking and Foucault show that apparently natural models of identity in fact emerge historically, over decades and centuries, I will show how apparently widespread sociohistorical models of identity vary as specific versions emerge locally. There is not one model of "loud black girl" and "resistant black male" in the contemporary United States that recurs in the same form across contexts. It does not suffice to argue simply that Tyisha and Maurice were identified as typical black girls and boys. Other African American students in the classroom did not get identified as outcasts, and Tyisha and Maurice did not fit the typical models in important respects. In order to provide a more adequate analysis, we must investigate empirically how a model of identity can take distinctive form in local contexts and how that locally inflected model is applied to individuals in specific ways. To apply sociohistorical models of identity uncritically, as if they "naturally" have the same form across contexts, would fail to explain how social identification actually happens in context.

### **Timescales of Identification**

Lemke's (2000) concept of "timescales" helps clarify the relation between widely circulating models of identity, like those described by Hacking and Foucault, and the versions of these models that occur in local contexts like Mrs. Bailey and Mr. Smith's classroom over an academic year. Processes relevant to understanding meaningful human action take place across various characteristic time intervals – from the milliseconds required for neuromuscular activity, to the seconds required for ritualized interactional

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coordination, to the days or months required for group consensus-building, to the years required for the development of neuroses, to the centuries sometimes required for transformation in socioeconomic systems. Social scientists often represent these as different levels of explanation and argue that different phenomena can be explained at different levels. Lemke presents an alternative approach. He argues that any phenomenon is constrained and made possible by processes at several disparate timescales.

To understand how Tyisha was ultimately identified as a disruptive outcast in Mrs. Bailey and Mr. Smith's classroom, for example, we need to explore "cross-timescale relations" – the set of linked processes across several timescales that collectively explain how this phenomenon occurred. As I argue in more detail in Chapter 4, it will not suffice simply to argue that she is an African American girl who was tarred with the longer timescale stereotype of being a "loud black girl." Her social identification as a beast, in the example of Tyisha and her cat, did happen only as teachers and students presuppose longer timescale models associated with her race and gender. But these longer timescale models were mediated through and changed by processes at shorter timescales.

As has been described by Garfinkel (1967), Rampton (1999), Schegloff (1988) and many others, widely circulating sociohistorical models of identity only take effect as they are successfully applied in events of identification. The application of such a category in practice is a contingent accomplishment that can misfire or take unexpected form. Analyzing Tyisha's social identification thus requires both attention to sociohistorically emergent categories of identity and interactionally emergent applications of these categories in events of identification. But I argue that, as illustrated by the cases of Tyisha and Maurice, we must attend to *other* timescales *beyond* sociohistorical and event-level emergence. In this case, we must also study how *local* categories of identity emerge in the classroom over the academic year.

In order to analyze the social identification and academic learning that occurred in Mrs. Bailey and Mr. Smith's classroom over the academic year, we must attend to a months-long timescale across which classroom-specific habitual patterns of social identification and academic learning developed. Teachers and students developed local models of identity and habitually apply these to students like Tyisha and Maurice over the academic year. They also developed local models of curricular topics and used these as they worked to understand the subject matter. "Disruptive outcast," for instance, meant something particular to these teachers and students because they developed a local model of this identity that drew on their own experiences and discussions. This local model was constrained by longer timescale processes, but it cannot be fully predicted from those longer timescale processes. The local model was also constituted by shorter timescale processes, like the use of certain categories to identify Tyisha or

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Maurice in particular classroom discussions. The local model emerged from but cannot be reduced to event-level processes.

Hacking and Foucault demonstrate the historical contingency and trace the emergence of models of identity across decades and centuries. Similarly, I will show the contingency and emergence of models of identity in local contexts like this one classroom over several months. Tyisha was not simply a loud black girl and Maurice was not simply a resistant black male. The analyses in Chapters 4 and 5 show them getting identified as somewhat familiar and somewhat peculiar versions of these categories. The social identification that actually happened to Tyisha and Maurice in this classroom cannot be understood without attending to contingent models of identity local to this classroom, because these local models emerged from but partly transformed more widely circulating models. Students and teachers could not have developed the local models they did without using sociohistorical models as resources. But they used these resources to build context-specific local models.

The social identification of students like Tyisha and Maurice, then, depends on contingent models of identity that emerge historically, locally and interactionally. Models of identity emerge at all three timescales (and across other timescales as well), and adequate empirical analyses will trace the emergence and reveal the contingent character of models at each timescale. My analyses in this book attend to emerging local models in particular, because of the central role these models play in explaining students' social identification in this classroom. I also attend to the contingent use of both sociohistorical and local models of identity within minutes-long events. Thus I analyze the interplay of emerging local models and the contingent events in which these and other models are used and sometimes transformed. I do not trace the emergence of sociohistorical models of identity like "resistant black male" across decades, although such models have emerged historically. One analysis cannot document all relevant timescales. I rely instead on others' descriptions of how these sociohistorical models have developed and are commonly used in contemporary America.

Close attention to the local timescale in this case also makes visible the intertwining of social identification and academic learning. By tracing the distinctive local models of identity that emerged in this classroom, as these teachers and students talked to each other over several months, we can see overlaps between social identification and academic learning that would not be visible if we attended only to isolated events or to more widely circulating sociohistorical models. Processes at other timescales played an important role in both social identification and academic learning in this classroom, and I attend to some of these processes in the analyses below. But I focus on the local timescale of these teachers' and students' interactions over an academic year, because this makes visible a distinctive