Mediated Means, Constructive Reading, Invisible Intertextuality, and Social Justice

or

How What we Read, Who we Read, and How we Read Connects to Problem-Solving in the Community

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Behind all of the theory, the jargon-words of the moment, and the rush towards graduation, tenure, and publication lie real people in real worlds with real problems. This world of the real — multivariate, contingent, and complex — can be united with academia in different ways: it may be the recipient of our academic favors; it may serve as the object of our study; or it may be a co-collaborator in the construction and negotiation of knowledge. This latter relationship is being forwarded by service learning and university outreach programs as a community/university relationship with an eye out for social justice. But a collaboration is not a collaboration and a theoretical conjoining of expertise may play out in radically dangerous ways in the real lives of at-risk community members (just think of the Pruitt-Igo disaster in St. Louis, where housing projects were constructed without consulting with the community, and which were blown up just five years after they were first build because of their disastrous living conditions). It is common knowledge in the social circles of composition and rhetoric that just “doing” collaboration can have little to no effect in our classrooms. This “neutral effect” also holds for university/community collaborations — and neutrality can quickly turn to danger when there are real lives at stake instead of freshman essays.

Carnegie Mellon University’s Center for University Outreach is interested in creating community/university collaborations which both work towards social justice and help students to put their new scholarly theory into the context of real world practice. Such a collaboration invariably recognizes the expertise of all players in the joint venture: community members, students, professors, and program administrators. One such program is the Community Literacy Center on Pittsburgh’s North Side. The CLC was founded as a place to give voice to at-risk teens in ways which would solve problems for them and their communities. Each semester, teens from various North Side communities join up with mentors from Carnegie Mellon to dialogue and write about shared concerns (past issues have included respect, gang violence, and curfew). Lately, the CLC has joined the Center for Outreach in the “Roads to Work, Roads to Learning” program. This program, started in the fall of 1996, hopes to address issues of economic inequality in the city of Pittsburgh, with an emphasis on collaborative inquiry into work and the culture of work.

One of the activities that the teens and mentors participate in is story-telling around the issue of work, work and identity, and the culture of work. These stories are meant to accomplish various ends: first, they acknowledge the expertise and talent of teens who may have work experience which is non-traditional (such as babysitting, volunteer work, and family responsibilities); second, the stories can serve as a space for teens to recognize their own place within the culture of work — a place they often do not feel they occupy; lastly, the stories, which are elicited from teens, mentors, and outside workers like nurses and maintenance workers, give teens the “low down” on the world
of work — hopefully bypassing the myths and accessing the realities of what it means to work in the 1990’s. This last movement is particularly important, as the “low down” on work will include narratives about difficulties, accomplishments, employer/employee relationships, and the debunking of mythical points-of-view on entry-level jobs. These stories will prepare teens for the realities of work, equip them with strategies for dealing with difficulties, and point to ways in which they may take pride in all types of work.

It is important, then, that these stories be approached carefully. Just as all collaborations are not equal, neither are all interpretations of these stories equal. As a teen and mentor work on their stories together, their strategies for interpretation will lead them to view work in certain focused manners. If a teen and a mentor are talking about an entry-level janitorial position, and both the teen and the mentor view such a position as demeaning and distasteful, then it is likely that this interpretation would not lead the teen (or the mentor) on the road to work in this direction — even if this direction could be promising for their future careers (or become their future careers). The point is not that their interpretations do not hold any credence — their interpretations, instead, are only part of the story. The part of the story that these interpretations uncover are artifacts of the intertextual situatedness of the teens’ and mentors’ life-experience and interpretive strategies (and, let’s be frank, in a situation where a teen and a Carnegie Mellon University undergraduate are collaborating, the mentor’s interpretation, biased or not, is going to be a powerful interpretive element) — in a very real sense, their interpretations never had a chance to go beyond their necessarily limited intertextual geographies (geographies build from necessarily limited life experiences).

How, then, might we approach this issue, if it is an issue at all? The purpose of this study is to map the various interpretations and intertextual geographies (interpretable “raw material”) of various people as they read one of the work stories. This story, written by a Carnegie Mellon undergraduate mentor, revolves around his first job — a job in maintenance at Hill’s Department Store. The readers included college students, college graduates, maintenance and janitorial staff, and a former employer of maintenance staff. Their interpretations and intertexts were then mapped to see where they converged, where they diverged, and where they gave information which could be vitally important to young inner-city teens on the verge of beginning their careers. But, first, I would like to lay a theoretical ground for this study — to say what I mean when I use the words “construction,” “negotiation,” and “intertextuality,” and to place these terms into the political arena of liberatory and experiential education for social justice.

**Reader Construction**

When readers interpret, they actively construct meaning in collaboration with a text. This construction is a mixture of reader experience, authorial/textual cues, reader intention, reading environment, and other factors. Tierney and Pearson write that:

meaning is created as a reader uses his background of experience together with the author’s cues to come to grips both with what the writer is getting him to do or think and what the reader decides and creates for himself (33).

Therefore, we can imagine a reader, in the terms of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, as dialoguing with a text to create meaning. If one imagines the text having hands, and the reader’s mind having hands, meaning is constructed as these two sets of hands reach out and clasp. Where
that clasping takes place, and what interpretation(s) result from that clasping, is a mixture of reader(s)/author(s)/textual context.

This same type of construction occurs each time we read a text. How much of the construction of interpretation that the reader provides depends upon many factors: reading ability, interpretive strategies, knowledge of topic, and/or reader interest (all of which form this reader’s unique intertextual geography, with which his/her reading is constructed). It has been found that readers’ interpretations vary widely with their intellectual maturity. Haas and Flower (1988) found that immature readers glean most of their interpretation from the text:

What many of our students can do is to construct representations of content, of structure, and of conventional features. What they often fail to do is to move beyond content and convention and construct representations of texts as purposeful actions, arising from contexts, and with intended effects. “Critical reading” involves more than careful reading for content, much more than identification of conventional features of discourse, such as introductions or examples, and more than simple evaluation based on agreeing or disagreeing. Sophisticated, difficult texts often require the reader to build an equally sophisticated, complex representation of meaning (p. 170).

Haas and Flower’s research supports the view that inexperienced readers construct little of their information from materials outside of the text (that is, their internal reading strategies call for them to construct meaning from textual cues only). They extract their interpretation from content features: they paraphrase, they look up words in the dictionary, they agree or disagree with main points. When Haas and Flower conducted a study on this subject, they found that, within the armory of rhetorical strategies which their three subjects used, less than one percent were sophisticated interpretive strategies, or, in their language, “rhetorical readings” (176):

Rhetorical strategies take a step beyond the text itself. They are concerned with constructing a rhetorical situation for the text, trying to account for author’s purpose, context, and effect on the audience. In rhetorical reading strategies readers use cues in the text, and their own knowledge of discourse situation, to recreate or infer the rhetorical situation of the text they are reading (p. 176).

Therefore, experienced readers see the text as a construction by an author, not as a “fact-sheet” that is just waiting for a reader to strain off its truth. Reading with sophistication involves an active construction between reader, author, and text, with each factor (and its context) offering differing levels of impact in the final (or not so final) interpretation.

But even expert writers and readers can construct a narrative which turns a silent face to portions of the communities which surround him or her. One only need to pick up a scholarly journal to see two highly respected academics arguing passionately for two completely opposite sides of the same issue. One reason for such divergent constructions may lie in the realm of “bounded rationality.” In 1958, March and Simon wrote that bounded rationality was a large factor in employee/employer miscommunication:

It has been the central theme of this chapter that the basic features of organization structure and function derive from the characteristics of human problem-solving processes and rational
human choice. Because of the limits of human intellective capacities in comparison with the complexities of the problems that individuals and organizations face, rational behavior calls for simplified models that capture the main features of a problem without capturing all of its complexities (p. 169).

Bounded rationality, then, is the limited ability of individuals to understand the full complexity of any given issue. But bounded rationality, according to March and Simon, has both a positive and a negative side. They write that “if there were not boundaries to rationality, or if the boundaries varied in a rapid and unpredictable manner, there could be no stable organization structure” (p. 171). Bounded rationality, then, is not only a limiting factor, but is also a coping strategy for both individuals and organizations — a strategy which extracts sense from an infinitely complex world. However, two readers using the same “coping” strategies can construct completely different interpretations of the same text or a situation — and such a difference can have unsavory effects. Do we explain away such differences as “inescapable,” and put up with the hurt feelings and lives which result (like in the Pruitt-Igo disaster), or might we approach these differences as something which can be addressed and revised? Seen through the lens of humans-as-agents, bounded rationality is a “state of mind” which can be approached and revised through education, and thus lead more directed and sensitive strategies for reading and writing. This point of agency is where some rhetorical theorists begin talking about the negotiated construction of meaning.

**Construction and Negotiation of Meaning**

Socio-cognitive theorist Linda Flower has furthered the metaphor of construction by arguing that readers, particularly expert readers, may also negotiate as they construct. This negotiation implies that readers must make give-and-take decisions about their conflicting goals. Flower describes negotiation as such:

Creating meaning amidst a welter of expectations and constraints, writers and readers have to deal with contradictory information, conflicting goals, and other people, with assignments by teachers, advice by friends, and their own needs and desires. Literate acts push writers to construct negotiated meanings that juggle constraints, goals, and expectations. Such literate acts depend on strategic thinking to read the rhetorical situation, to set goals, and to construct and negotiate meaning (24).

Flower further writes that:

The process of constructing negotiated meaning comes into play for a writer when two necessary conditions hold:

- when the process of meaning making is subject to pressure, to covering constraints and options, or to conflict among goals; and
- when writers turn their attention at some level of awareness to managing or negotiating this problematic cognitive and rhetorical situation (67).

Negotiation is therefore an act that is not always present for writers and readers — we negotiate when we must make decisions among competing goals, values, or problems. Divergent constructions can therefore be seen as the result of more than bounded rationality: different readings can also result from the negotiated choices that a writer or reader makes to fulfill his or her goals.
do negotiate, this act is necessarily a difficult, complex, and often chaotic job which we must learn to
skillfully manage in order to succeed in our various goals: from future academic and “real-world”
careers to movements of social justice (where decision making is almost never as cut-and-dried as a
typical “contained in the classroom” project).

**Limited Negotiation**

However, even when a writer may need to negotiate, this construction and negotiation is
often limited to personal/academic constraints and goals. A student who is writing a story about her
first job experience might be negotiating among goals which include introspection, appearing intelli-
gent to her readers, and keeping the story interesting by inserting instances of humor or pathos.

When a professor writes, he/she has a different menu of goals: tastes/rules of journal editors or
grant-givers, expectations of the disciplinary population, and how their writing will hurt/help their
“tenurability.” The goals may be different for these two writers, but the process of negotiation that
they must undergo is the same: some goals become more important than others — some goals are
only halfway met — some goals are given up entirely.

Although these “goal-menus” are certainly complex, they are not often fully representative of
the total possible representations of the expertise and wishes of interested peoples. Following the
example of the “first job story” assignment above, the student may not have considered the view-
points of her employers, or the viewpoints of employees who are stuck in “first jobs” like hers for a
lifetime. These left-out goals and expertises are not random “oversights”: often, they are those of
marginalized populations, community members, the working-class, women, children, the elderly, the
homeless, and those who are sick, handicapped, or poor — in short, those populations who are not in
close contact with the “learned knowledge makers” of the university. The student, who never had to
consider the “plight” of someone not on the fast track to success like she is, is not sensitive to negoti-
ating constructions which take their special situations into consideration; this is not to say that she is
being overtly or consciously racist or classist — rather, her constructive strategies for writing do not
include searching for representations outside of her experience. While such a position is understand-
able, it might not be desirable in a situation where her story could have real-world effects on real-
world people.

**Mediated Action**

In addition to non-inclusive goal-menus, the very means through which academic action is
legitimized may limit the inclusion of community issues and voices for academic writers. James V.
Wertsch, in explaining Vygotsky’s theory of mediated action (1978, 1982), writes that academic
writing and reading (or any other kind of languaged action) cannot be understood without taking its
social and cultural context, or its “situation,” into consideration. This understanding of how lan-
guage is situated in a particular context, and how this context leads to limited ways of viewing the
world, can be examined without doing a large cross-cultural analysis:

A sociocultural approach to mediated action need not involve explicit comparison; the main
riterion is that the analysis be linked in some way with specific cultural, historical, or insti-
tutional factors. And even in the case of sociocultural studies that involve no explicit com-
parison, the comparative method lurks just beneath the surface, since the notion of
situatedness implies a contrast with other possibilities (19).
The implication in Vygotsky’s and Wertsch’s theory is that the means through which we describe and think about the world play a large part in creating this world. And understanding how thought creates our world is not simple — thought, as Vygotsky writes, “has its own structure, and the transition from it to speech is no easy matter” (Thought and Language, 250). In addition, Vygotsky writes that:

Experience teaches us that thought does not express itself in words, but rather realizes itself in them. . . The problem is that thought is mediated by signs externally, but it also is mediated internally, this time by word meanings. Direct communication between minds is impossible, not only physically but psychologically. Communication can be achieved only in a round-about way. Thought must first pass through meanings and only then through words (251-52).

It, as Vygotsky writes, thought is only realized externally through words, then it makes sense that the types of words, the strategies for creating them or internally storing them, will have a large effect upon meaning. Since we are necessarily constrained by genre, languages, discourse communities, class- and ethnic-dialects, and norms for speaking and silence, then we cannot realize our thoughts in ways which are sensitive to all audiences at all times: doing so would, as March and Simon assert, be utter chaos. But this force in language to keep other ways of mediation out (what Bakhtin calls the centripetal force of language), cannot be understood outside of its sociocultural situatedness — any situation is inextricably tied to political forces which oppress some while liberating others.

The problem is not that we should wish to deny the boundedness of our rationality, but rather to admit to it, and to actively work against it when there is a need to. But, as Wertsch writes, it is not always easy for writers or knowledge-makers to admit that their mediated means (that is, the ways that they express themselves in order to reach their goals) are not direct doorways into truth:

The semiotic action associated with scientific concepts is decontextualized because it focuses on forms and meanings that remain constant across speech event contexts. In no sense is semiotic action itself decontextualized; indeed, “decontextualized action” would be a contradiction in terms. What is decontextualized are the mediational means, which have come to be treated as abstract objects of reflection rather than as embedded in the context of other forms of intermental or intramental action (39).

Such decontextualization might be a dangerous (and sometimes passive and unconscious) move. In the case of our teen writers, when we approach them with stories and interpretations which are grounded in academic mediational means, and expressions and intertexts which are situated in middle-class culture, we run the risk of presenting to them a picture of “truth” which is far from “whole.” When such a partial picture has real-world consequences, as is the case when inner-city teenagers are striking out into their working lives, we might wish to approach the situation with our mediational doorways wide open.

Intertextuality Defined

Intertextuality, the construction of negotiated meaning, and mediated means are academic brothers and sisters: the construction and negotiation of conflicting goals presupposes the inclusion of multiple levels of meaning in the reading and writing of texts. Intertextuality has one of its
beginnings with M. M. Bakhtin and his revolutionary theory of textual analysis. In an elegant use of metaphor, Bakhtin writes that a word echoes with meanings (Discourse and the Novel, 1981). These echoes are comprised of several things: the history of the word, the relationship of the word to its context, and the understanding of the word that the reader brings to it:

Indeed, any concrete discourse (utterance) finds the object at which it was directed already as it were overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value, already enveloped in an obscuring mist — or, on the contrary, by the “light” of alien words that have already been spoken about it. It is entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents. The word, directed towards its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group: and all this may crucially shape discourse, may leave a trace in all its semantic layers, may complicate its expression and influence its entire stylistic profile (276).

Bakhtin’s (beautifully poetic) understanding of “word” is not limited to a phoneme or a meaningful collection of letters. A “word” can be any text: this paper that I am writing is a text, so is the image of me writing it, so is my image of you reading it, and so are the various interpretations that my reader or readers will construct. Any text is rife with echoes and connections; this understanding of the nature of text is called intertextuality (coined by Julia Kristeva, 1980, 1986) — the physical/mental presence of these connections is called the intertext. The intertext can be many things: it may be found within the text (by referring to Plato or by citing Bakhtin), it may be constructed by the reader (imagine a reader perusing a text about Easter Island — the reader has been to Easter Island and hated it — the reader therefore distrusts the author and his/her text), or it may be effected by stylistic devices/tone (the word “Christian” used sarcastically is not the same thing as the word “Christian” used reverently).

Steve Witte has written of reader construction and intertextuality (1992), referring to the Peircian triad of sign-object-interpretant (or unlimited semiosis) to explain how a reader constructs
textual meaning (see Figure 1). Peirce’s single triad replaces the Saussurian sign of signified-signifier by adding the third element of “interpretant.” In short, the triad constructs meaning as the sign refers to the object, and the sign is in turn partly determined by that object — however, the interpretant (which may be defined as a single element of reader construction; for example, a reader interprets the idea “freedom” with the interpretant of “the Civil War”) is also determined by and is a determiner of the sign/object relationship. None of the three things may exist without the other — Witte writes that “the interpretant is a crucial component [of the triad] because for Peirce ‘nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign’ . . . which turns the triadic sign relation depicted [in the above Figure] into a model of an active and constructive meaning making process” (279). In other words, a sign and its signified object is meaningless without a subject’s understanding of it. This subject, or interpretant, therefore plays an active and crucial role in constructing textual meaning. In addition, Witte adds,

> if we recognize that the interpretant in Peirce’s scheme is that “cognition produced in the mind” and that the interpretant becomes “in turn a sign,” then it follows that, first, all thoughts are themselves signs (i.e., triadic sign relations) and, second, that thinking and cognition cannot occur except within the framework of unlimited semiosis. That is to say, semiosis is thinking (282, emphasis added).

This cycle of sign-object-interpretant could be, in effect, infinite:

> Once the interpretant is itself recognized as a sign, then that sign becomes part of a new triadic relation such that the original interpretant, now a sign, participates also in a new dynamic relation with an object and another interpretation, which — becoming itself a sign — permits the occurrence of yet another semiotic “moment.” Thus the process of semiosis has at least the potential to go on endlessly (281).

Imagine that one is reading a narrative about a woman’s waitress job. The reader understands waitresses to look and act a certain way (interpretant #1). A further interpretant may be a memory of pleasant experiences in a certain café with a certain waitress (interpretant #2). Yet another interpretant could be the memory a New York Times article about waitresses and sexual harassment (interpretant #3). In addition to each of these interpretants effecting the reader’s construction of the original sign/object “waitress,” each of these three interpretants is also a text in itself, and will also be constructed by other interpretances (i.e., the interpretant of the way a waitress looks becomes itself a sign, which is linked to other interpretants, for example, the memory of the hairstyle of one particular waitress at a pancake house).

Witte further revises Peirce’s triadic model, inserting text for sign, context for object, and intertext for interpretant:

This model of textual interpretation/construction works on two precepts: “(a) that the relation of a ‘text’ to its ‘context’ is a reciprocal one and (b) that the relation of a ‘text’ to its ‘intertext(s)’ is also reciprocal” (285). To clarify, a text and its context reciprocally create one another, and a text and its intertext also reciprocally create one another. Text, context, and intertext are impossible without each other. Witte uses an example of a woman’s (“Marilee”) grocery list to illustrate his point:
In writing the grocery list (i.e., “the text), Marilee was influenced by her knowledge of the grocery store context; and her grocery list itself constructed the context of shopping for her as it would later construct the various familial contexts of meal preparation, the meals themselves, and so forth. The same sort of reciprocal relationship existed between the grocery list and its various intertexts. For example, the conversation Marilee and her husband had about the projected guest meal can be seen as subsumed by an intertext of semiotically constructed meanings between Marilee and her husband. As I have suggested, that intertext figured in the writing of the grocery list. Moreover, the intertextual stream of which that intertext was a part would be perpetuated and enlarged both by the shopping trip and by the guest meal itself (285-286). 

Although Witte’s example may seem simplistic, it proves his point that text, context, and intertext interact in making textual constructions. Even a grocery list does not exist without extremely complex representations and constructions of textual meaning, physical context, and past and projected experiences. Witte’s list also sheds light upon the constructed and intertextual “nature” of reading. We would certainly “make a mess” (286) of Marilee’s grocery list without access to her personal intertexts (e.g., for the list item “cheese,” we might buy Cheese Whiz instead of freshly grated Romano). All texts, simple or complex, contain myriads of possible constructions and intertextual links.

Witte’s understanding of reader construction and intertextuality is very rich. He stretches the event of a text far past the boundaries of its physical artifact to include, for example, plans, memories, experiences, projections, and mood (we might call these events the “internal intertext” of any single textual artifact). Moreover, he stretches the textual event far past the last words typed or written by the author — a textual/intertextual event includes a reader’s constructions and intertexts, and how and if that reader will use his or her construction in future publications/scholarship (these events may be termed “external intertexts”).
What is Invisible Intertextuality?

I have no argument with the existence of intertextuality, intertext, or reader construction and negotiation. But as Julia Kristeva wrote in Revolution in Poetic Language:

the term inter-textuality denotes [the] transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another; but since this term has often been understood in the banal sense of ‘study of sources,’ we prefer the term transposition because it specifies that the passage of one signifying system to another demands a new articulation of the thetic . . . If one grants that every signifying practice is a field of transpositions of various signifying systems (an intertextuality), one then understands that its ‘place’ of enunciation and its denoted ‘object’ are never single, complete, and identical to themselves, but always plural, shattered, capable of being tabulated (59-60, emphasis added).

Kristeva’s point, much like Vygotsky’s theory of thought and language, is well taken, and I argue that it applies to the creation and interpretation of all texts, not just literature: every symbolic representation that we use (i.e., read or write) is just that — a representation. We can never get past the fact that the symbolic representations of human beings are, as Kristeva writes, transpositions from one sign system to another, and these transpositions are “always already” incomplete, shifting, subjective, multi-leveled, and conflicting. Moving Kristeva’s theory of poetic intertextuality into the rhetoric of everyday life (i.e., journalism, teen-published booklets, student papers, scientific essays, television, Web pages, letter writing, and Witte’s grocery lists) opens up a Pandora’s box of semiotic confusion. But the fact of semiotic confusion does not need to be celebrated as utter chaos; nor must rhetorical researchers throw up their hands in the light of such “unlimited semiosis.” Rather, rhetorical researchers and theory-builders are right to think of intertextuality as a researchable, mappable human phenomenon, capable of being tabulated, as Kristeva writes.

However, intertextuality might not be as chaotic as Kristeva, Bakhtin, and Witte claim — exigencies of practical life (time constraints, where we live, who lives next to us, the languages we speak), class-, race-, and gender power moves, and social constructions of reading and writing practices shape our intertexts in powerful ways. It is possible that the actual intertexts provided in any one reading/writing act (an act which is conducted by individuals who have limited experience, and limited interpretive strategies) are much less chaotic and inclusive than we might wish them to be. This actual limitation of voices and intertexts leads Wertsch to ask us to consider why the heterogeneity of our world’s languages are so often ignored:

The notion of heterogeneity calls on us to consider why certain forms of speaking and thinking (voices) rather than others are invoked on particular occasions. It also forces us to recognize that we cannot answer this question simply on the basis of the metaphor of possession, which focuses on what humans “have” in the way of concepts and skills. Instead, we must consider how and why a particular voice occupies center stage, that is, why it is “privileged” (Wertsch, 1987) in a particular setting (14).

Intertexts are therefore not always constructions, but rather constructive practices, melded with (more or less) agency by individual minds (which, as Wertsch notes, have been partly shaped by sociocultural environment), in dialogue with the text/task. Seeing texts, intertexts, and interpretations as constructive practices which privilege and/or ignore, foregrounds the agency and subjectiv-
ity of literate acts, making it hard for intertextuality to be seen as something fixed and objective or as something endlessly chaotic.

Intertextuality, therefore, is up for question: how chaotic are actual intertexts-in-practice? How might a different view of what an intertext “is” change our notions to include missing, “invisible” intertexts? And, finally, what do we gain from seeing intertextuality as a subjective action, amenable to change through revised pedagogies of reading and writing? Considering these questions, I find that current intertextual theory and practice is limited in three specific areas:

• Intertextual methodology often relies exclusively on the intertextual links which are physically present in the textual artifact (or links which flow from the reader’s own construction). But surely there are realities which exist outside of the writer’s and readers’ minds. Although much work has been done in feminist studies about material which is missing from academic texts and scholarship, this work has not specifically been addressed in terms of intertextuality or invisible intertextuality, and even less has been addressed in issues outside of literature and poetics.

• Scholarship on intertextuality tends to objectify the textual event and its intertextual links. But texts and intertexts exist only because they are “given life” by human, and therefore fallible, writers and readers who are incapable of capturing “everything,” (although this infallibility is, again, not a reason for us to throw our hands up in helplessness — it is something we can reduce through the use of revised reading and writing strategies).

• Much published research on intertextuality focuses only on the existence of intertextuality as a theoretical and practical “fact” — these studies do not reflect upon or problematize the current methodology associated with studying it, and in particular do not recognize or theorize about absences in the intertext (again, feminist studies theorize about absences in text, but they do not do so in terms of intertextuality — nor do they focus enough on non-gendered/powered reasons that intertexts might be invisible/missing — in addition, most of this work is focused solely on literary works).

I will treat each of these issues, argue that these problems have large implications for writers, readers, teachers, students, and researchers (among others), and finally propose some suggestions for the future practical/theoretical/methodological uses of intertext and intertextuality.

Much of the current (and past) published material on intertextuality focuses only on the intertextual links which are physically present in the textual artifact. Charles Bazerman opens his article Intertextual Self-Fashioning: Gould and Lewontin’s Representations of the Literature by writing that “modern scientific articles almost universally represent themselves as part of a literature through explicit citation and through discussion of other texts identified as being closely related” (20). Bazerman argues that evolutionary scientists Stephen Jay Gould and R. C. Lewontin, in their article The Spandrels of San Marco and the Panglossian Paradigm, “reconstruct the intertext against which the article will be read” (21), and that this reconstruction uproots and reforms the cited texts in a specific, desired (and in this case negative) image. Similarly, Bazerman talks of the authors’ intertextual representations of architecture, culture, and the Spirit of Darwin. While Bazerman’s interpretation is rigorous, it does not question or critically problematize the authors’ intertexts (especially non-represented intertexts) — however, he does open a window for such a critical interpreta-
Because the intertext is such a strategic site of contention — the battlefield for control of the cognitive universe within which new claims will be read — analysis of intertextual representations lets us see not only the rhetorical game being played, but also the struggle to define the rules and limits and stakes of that game (21).

In one way, Bazerman takes up this line of argument and runs with it, illustrating how Gould and Lewontin’s intertext redefines the world in new (read: their) terms. However, Bazerman does not ask other questions, questions which for me are a natural result of the above quote: who controls the “battlefield of the cognitive universe?” If that control is biased, how is this bias represented in Gould and Lewontin’s article? What are the stakes of this game in terms of non- or under-represented subjects? In the strategic, contentious site of intertext, who is allowed in: whose knowledge counts to define and redefine that fight?

Referring only to those textual links and citations that are present constructs a second, and larger, problem: citations, texts, and authors (except the authors of the citing article) become objects to study rather than artifacts of subjects who construct. However, it is dangerous to reduce textual events, events which are impossible without subjects and their social constructions, to objects or “facts” (a fact is like a diamond: cold, hard, and something to be protected and coveted — however, many diamonds are rife with flaws and cracks when magnified).

Paulo Freire writes that:

the oppressor consciousness tends to transform everything surrounding it into an object of its domination. The earth, property, production, the creations of people, people themselves, time — everything is reduced to the status of objects at its disposal (40).

Objectifying text and “fact” is a problem which stems from the “oppressor mentality” of owning things, and of “being” through owning these things. This “owning as being” is not limited to owning physical items such as shoes or gold nuggets. One may also own people, and own knowledge. When a person practices the oppressive act of “owning” people or knowledge, they treat these people and facts as objects to be picked up, defined, measured, thrown away, and used, rather than as social beings with contradictions, existence outside of their relationships with the oppressors, and the ability to create their own truths, self-definitions, and knowledge. This ability to create, and to have the freedom to recognize the social biases and bases of reality is what it means to be a “subject” rather than an “object.” A subject moves — an object is moved. A subject defines — an object is defined. A subject creates — an object is created. The objectification and reification of constructed practice as “fact” denies the subjectivity of both the creators and the created, the oppressors and the oppressed. This denial of working hands takes the power out of the hands of those who need it most; it is therefore important to place and problematize all texts and facts within the context of (often invisible) subjective and constructed events which created them (an event it itself not an object, but a practice which is made possible and constructed by subjects).

Linked to this issue of objectifying the intertext is the fact that most articles about intertextuality focus only on proving its existence. Bakhtin, Witte, Bazerman, and many others make arguments for the “fact” of the intertext, but they rarely go beyond this point. Witte opens up a
studying the production and use of “writing” from a perspective that privileges spoken or written linguistic systems of meaning-making and ignore other systems of meaning-making can hardly yield a comprehensive or a culturally viable understanding of “writing” or “text” (240).

But Witte never goes through that window (other than noting that Peirce said that our actual intertexts are limited by the practical constraints of life — but these practices are not problematized or politicized by Peirce or Witte). Although his article Context, Text, Intertext is lengthy and varied, he never treats how and why intertexts do not represent more of the event, and in fact never studies which parts of the event are not included at all. Instead, he argues for the existence of “nonlinguistic” events in writing. Later, he writes that “it becomes clear how heavily collaborative even relatively simple writing tasks such as making a grocery list can be” (265). Witte does not take up this extremely fruitful line of inquiry, or, at the very least, he does not take it into the direction of critical inquiry. Like before, he states that writing is heavily collaborative and leaves his reader to construct this as a fact.

Other researchers will conduct think-aloud protocols to determine how the reader constructs his or her personal intertext (Charney, 1993); again, these studies neglect to speak about how absences in the intertext of the textual artifact (and in the readers’ own intertext) effect that construction, and how this (now biased) construction effects the further production of knowledge. I argue that absences in the intertext are just as “factual” (inasmuch as socially constructed “facts” are “factual”) as cited articles, figures, people, or historical “happenings” (although I would also argue that these absences are only absent in the physical or textual/sensual dimension — a participant in the textual event is part of the intertext whether he or she is represented or not).

These limited practices and theories of intertext, intertextuality, and reader construction buy readers/writers/others more than just simple absences and not-so-simple objectifications. For one thing, intertextuality is insidious in its claim to inclusion. It is easy for readers/subjects to believe that the chaotic and wide inclusion of intertextuality is the same as inclusion-of-all. But the intertext does not include all — and I argue that the inclusion that the intertext does give you is far from chaotic or wide. Instead, it is a highly focused inclusion, where only “members of the club” are allowed to enter and enjoy the privileges that an intertextual presence affords you (whether the barring of the door is conscious or not is of little matter when such a barring has real-world, possibly dangerous and oppressive effects). However, it is easy to mistake the slippery nature of intertextuality as a joyful “open cast-call” of inclusion. Lisa Gasbarrone writes that “Bakhtin welcomes rupture, transgression, and subversion of the language of authority” (5). But when it is only the transgressors who are transgressing, then the subversion is not subversion but rather the facade of subversion, a quick trick-of-the-hand that disguises the truly privileged nature of its “ruptured” language. (An example of a transgression of the transgressor is the Freidan model of feminism, which gave feminist status to white middle-class housewives, and ignored the issues of working class women or women of color).

I would like to present two models of intertextuality which foreground the background of invisible intertextuality. The first model is a revision of James Kinneavy’s textual triangle of the “world-reader-writer” meets text. James Kinneavy’s original triad depicts the world, writer, and
Kinneavy describes his triad as such:

Basic to all uses of language are a person who encodes a message [the writer], the signal (language) [text] which carries the message, the reality to which the text refers [the world], and the decoder (receiver of the message) [the reader] (19).

One can see intertextuality working in this triad in the interaction between the writer and the reader, the writer and the world, and the reader and the world (and all three of these with the text). A writer provides the reader with the intertext of citations; the reader provides the text with his/her own special understandings of words, definitions, and histories; the world provides intertextuality through physical and social correlations. However, this triad leaves out some problematic issues, specifically the issue of invisible intertextuality.

If I define invisible intertextuality as intertexts which are linked to the physical text (through writer, reader, world, or semiotics), but which are not acknowledged, taken into consideration, or are ignored, then I can revise Kinneavy’s textual model to include those invisible intertexts:

The cross-hatched areas represent recognized intertexts brought to the reading by the writer, the reader, the world, and the text:

• The reader’s intertexts are those which he/she brings to the reading (for example, a reader understands waitresses to be moody, so the reader imports negative characteristics to the waitress in the text)
• The writer’s intertexts are those which he/she brings physically to the text (for example, citations of scholarly articles).
• The world’s intertexts are those which correlate in the physical realm (for example, waitresses work with food)
• The text’s intertexts are semiotic/language relationships (for example, wait is not hate is not bait is not skate).
The diagonally-striped area represents all possible intertexts. Note that the cross-hatch covers some of the stripes — as I wrote above, the cross-hatch represents recognized intertexts. The stripes which are left “naked” represent invisible, unrecognized intertexts. Some examples might include community members whose opinions were not solicited, community members whom the text will effect — but this effect was not considered, people who played a role in creating the text but whose creating role was not recognized, and the interests of marginalized peoples/groups, such as the working-class, women, and gays and lesbians. The arrows around the yellow and lavender circles represent the changeable nature of intertextuality: an author may widen his or her intertextual representation by creating a more inclusive text; a reader may increase his/her intertextual representation by reading critically (i.e., reading for absences).

Witte’s model of intertextuality can also be revised. Witte’s original diagram tells readers that whenever they look at a text, they look at its language, the context the language is in, and then they add their own understandings to the context. These understandings are the “intertexts” that are brought to the text. However, Witte’s conception of intertext leaves something out. All of the intertexts are to be supplied by the writer, the reader, or the context. What if the writer forgot to include something important? For example, what if the writer actually co-authored his/her text, but didn’t list that co-author? What if the author wrote about inner-city teens, but didn’t actually talk with any of them? What if the author, who is a scientist, claims that her truth is “objective,” when it is actually a social construction which has been partly constructed from elite power-forces? I argue that each of these “what-ifs” is an invisible intertext, and that these are missing from Witte’s diagram (see Figure 5).

The difference between Witte’s original triad and Figure 5 is that the invisible has been made
visible. The intertexts below the dotted line are “invisible” intertexts — those intertext which, though present in the cultural and intertextual context, are ignored (either consciously or unconsciously) by the writer and/or reader. But adding culture is not enough to move into the more important mode of praxis, as Freire and Dewey correctly advise us (since praxis is defined as reflective action).

If we add the agency of the reader and writer to the revised model (see Figure 6), then both reader and writer can make some of the invisible intertexts visible by switching them from behind the dotted line (unrecognized intertext) directly into Witte’s semiotic model (recognized intertext). Such a foregrounding of agency highlights both the possibility of making the invisible visible, and the fact that it was human hands, human cognition, and human language which “forgot” about the existence of the invisible in the first place. That such forgetting may have been unconscious is of little import (and is not an excuse against working against our forgetfulness) when the results of such forgetting have effects on real people (or on the environment). I recognize that not all intertexts may be made visible — not should they be! However, depending on the constraints of the rhetorical situation, and the room for rhetorical resistance within that situation, some or many of these “invisible intertexts” may be made visible. Such a visioning will make a more complete, truthful, and ethical text.

**Conceptual Literacy and Education for Social Justice**

The above theories are interesting and fun to play with, but might stop at academic posturing unless they are connected to practice and real-world results. Educational philosophers Paulo Freire and John Dewey place progressive pedagogical theories into the classrooms of the university and the community, with an emphasis on pedagogy which humanizes and respects the everyday experiences of all people. Dewey foregrounds experience in his description of “new education:”

If one attempts to formulate the philosophy of education implicit in the practices of the new education, we may, I think, discover certain common principles amid the variety of progressive schools now existing. To imposition from above is opposed expression and cultivation of individuality; to external discipline is opposed free activity; to learning from texts and teachers, learning through experience; to acquisition of isolated skills and techniques by drill, is opposed acquisition of them as means of attaining ends which make direct vital appeal; to preparation for a more or less remote future is opposed making the most of the opportunities of present life; to static aims and materials is opposed acquaintance with a changing world (19-20).

Implicit in Dewey’s philosophy of education is his believe in democracy and freedom:

Can we find any reason that does not ultimately come down to the belief that democratic social arrangements promote a better quality of human experience, one which is more widely accessible and enjoyed, than do non-democratic and anti-democratic forms of social life? Does not the principle of regard for individual freedom and for decency and kindliness of human relations come back in the end to the conviction that these things are tributary to a higher quality of experience on the part of a greater number than are methods of repression or coercion or force? (34)
The strength of Dewey’s argument is its insistence on both political freedom and intellectual rigor. For Dewey, democratic education is not an experiential free-for-all; rather it is a process by which students (and community members) place their learning into the context of everyday experience — experience which has democratic political principles as one of its goals. In the case of our undergraduate mentors and teen writers, experiential education becomes a promising “safe area” for both deeply meaningful learning and social justice which is grounded in the research of real experience.

Paulo Freire (1971) makes much the same argument that Dewey does, writing that radical education is about both humane action with the people, and about a rigorous process for looking at, experiencing, and changing the world. What Shor (1981) has termed “conceptual literacy” (often termed “critical literacy” by radical scholars), is a vital part of the Freirian process of education. In Freire and Donaldo Macedo’s dialogue “The Illiteracy of Literacy in the United States,” Freire remarks that conceptual literacy means much more than understanding the words on a page, or how to put them there. Being conceptually literate implies an understanding of how styles and strategies for writing and reading are culturally situated. As Wertsch wrote about mediational means like academic writing:

the power of mediational means in organizing action is often not consciously recognized by those who use them, which contributes to the belief that cultural tools are the product of natural or necessary factors rather than of concrete sociocultural forces (37).

Freire’s conceptual literacy means being able to understand the cultural bases and biases of words and other mediational means, and how to move from this understanding into humane praxis (or reflective action). Such an understanding is vital for oppressed populations, since their own culturally situated mediational means are often deemed “naturally” inferior by political parties, by educational leaders and teachers, and perhaps even by themselves through internalization of the proclaimed “deficits” of their language — but no one’s language is naturally inferior to anyone else’s — and indeed ignoring someone’s voice because of “unsavory” stylistic features may be ignoring valuable information about the world.

For Freire, coming to a conceptual literacy which leads to community-based problem-solving necessarily involves the expertise of those who are effected by the problem (e.g., for our CLC mentors, the teens from Pittsburgh’s North Side, employed and unemployed adults from the same neighborhoods, and employers who hire young people) — and in most cases privileges their expertise over the expertise of outside “problem-solvers” who are not living in and with the problem (however, Freire does not discount outside expertise and its value — he only states that those who are living in and with the problem are innately more experienced with it, and will be better able to describe it, think about its causes, and try to form reflective solutions). Simply, Freire asks problem-solvers to negotiate between theory (theory which is often developed outside of the problem) and practice: or, in operational terms, to collaborate with community members, together melding their theories to the lived experiences of those involved with the problems, and to collaboratively reflect about how possible solutions might effect those same people.

Tying it All Together

So now that we understand that readers construct when they write and read, and that they
might negotiate also, and that they both construct and negotiate through mediational means which constrain their worlds, and that all of these actions are tied to external and internal intertextual geographies which contain only part of the picture, and that all of this stuff needs to be taken into consideration when undertaking education for social justice, how does my study fit into the big picture? Well, first I must confess that I don’t want this study to represent the big picture; rather, I’d like to know what happens when culturally diverse people read a work-related narrative. How are their interpretations same or different? How are their interpretations backed up with personal experience? And, most importantly, what can these differences tell the young people living in Pittsburgh’s inner-cities, who vitally need to understand what is going on in the wider culture of work they must enter? The questions I most want to answer are as follows: do readings of the same story differ between people in different cultural positions? And do divergent interpretations, if they exist, provide teens with new and important information they can pack into their work-related tool box?

Method

Subjects

This study analyzed data from six subjects:

‡ Subject 1, Greg, is a 28-year old white male from a rural working-class family. He worked as a maintenance man and as a factory worker while in college. He has a BA in finance, and has just completed an MBA. He works in the finance department of the May Company corporate headquarters.

‡ Subject 2, Tracy, is a 28-yrs old white female from a suburban working-class family. She has a BA in Psychology and has worked in day care, as a secretary, and is currently employed as an intake coordinator in a mental health network.

‡ Subject 3, Keith, is a black male in his late 20’s. He works as a maintenance man (janitorial staff) for Carnegie Mellon University. He has been working at this job for three years, and has three children.

‡ Subject 4, Susan, is a 30-year old white female from a suburban working-class family. She is a doctoral student at Carnegie Mellon University who is interested in radical education and working-class issues. She is married and has one child.

‡ Subject 5, Mrs. Mulooley, is a 78-year old white female from the Pittsburgh area. She has worked as a manager of maintenance crews for 400 college-student apartments, and sometimes performed maintenance work herself. She has a high school diploma, and three children, all of whom attended college.

‡ Subject 6, Frank, is a 35 year old black male, who has been working at Carnegie Mellon University as a custodian/maintenance worker for 18 years (since 1979). He is married with children.

Task 1 — Intervention Protocol

Five of the six subjects (Greg, Tracy, Keith, Susan, and Mrs. Mulooley) were given Task 1, a narrative about work written by a white male undergraduate at Carnegie Mellon University. The author was not identified to any of the subjects by name, gender, age, or ethnicity. The narrative was written for “Community Literacy and Intercultural Interpretation,” a course where Carnegie Mellon students mentor teens at the Community Literacy Center. The story was meant to be a springboard for reflecting upon work, work and identity, and the culture of work — hopefully leading to under-
standings which would help the teens in their future work lives. I wished to access how each of the five subjects “saw” the story as it developed — to find out what they thought the narrative “meant:” in other words, how they interpreted the story. In addition, I also wished to gain (partial) access to each reader’s intertext. I hoped that the readers would be able to remember the intertextual nodes (or, more plainly put, memories or emotions) which were activated through the process of interpreting each sentence. To this end, the narrative was broken up into 14 sentences separated by single spaces (see Appendix 1). The subjects read the sentences one at a time, unveiling them with a piece of white paper which had been placed over the as-yet-unread narrative. After each sentence was read, I asked each subject two questions: first, how do you interpret this sentence; and second, which of your own personal experiences backed up your interpretation?

This method of gradual unveiling has been termed “intervention protocol” or “in-process probing” by rhetorical researchers. Haas and Flower write that:

The technique of in-process probing tries to combine the immediacy of concurrent reporting with the depth of information obtained through frequent questioning. It can of course give us only an indirect and partial indication of the actual representation. What it does reveal are gist-making strategies used at a sequence of points during reading, and it offers a cumulative picture of text-under construction (172).

Swanson-Owens and Newell argue that intervention protocols are useful when trying to discern a reader’s or writer’s intellectual processes:

Interventions . . . are particularly useful when the researcher is interested in studying the online effects of scaffolds that (a) foster comprehension monitoring strategies or planning behavior, or (b) encourage students to consciously employ certain domains of knowledge (such as genre knowledge) to evaluate or plan text in the process of its evolution rather than before or after its completion. This protocol format can be equally valuable to researchers who are not interested in influencing the composing process per se, but hoping to gain access to goals, plans, strategies, and knowledge that are not stated during the composing process (146-47).

By controlling the reading process through unveiling only small sections of the text at a time, I hoped to see how readers constructed textual knowledge as a process of interpretation (even though this understanding of the process may only be viewed as a small window into a subject’s whole set of interpretive practices, some of which may be non-verbal and/or unconscious).

Coding for Task 1

Subject responses for Question 1 were coded for “interpretations.” Interpretations were operationally defined as: the linguistic representations a reader constructed from textual and intertextual cues (that is, the sentences they were reading and their cognitive/affective responses to those sentences) in response to the question: “how do you interpret this sentence?”

Subject Responses for Question 2 were coded for “intertexts,” operationally defined as the personal experiences, textual evidence, memories, emotions, or physical elements in the environment which the reader admitted to using to construct his/her prior interpretation(s) of a sentence, in
response to the question: “Which of your own personal experiences backed up your interpretation?”

**Task 2 — Cued Recall**

Task 2 consisted of the same 14 sentences, with seven words highlighted in bold text (see Appendix 2). The seven words were to be read in the same fashion as the earlier sentences, and the subjects were asked the same questions about the words. The cued recall was completed by Greg, Tracy, Susan, and Keith. Cued recall methodology can make be an important part of rhetorical research because, as Greene and Higgins write:

> Retrospective reports, used alone or in conjunction with other methods, have enabled researchers to build a richer understanding of the relationship among texts, situational factors, and writers’ constructive processes (117).

To be able to make sense out of the tangles of interpretations and intertexts, I felt that a conjunction of methods was important for this study. In addition, I wanted to get the richer, more explicit data that cued recall sessions often yield (and, indeed, the cued recall method in this study was extremely fruitful). Greene and Higgins believe that such richness in data results from the fact that subjects are no longer “on-task:” since the reader is no longer engaged in the tough job of interpretation, he or she is free to take a more leisurely look at their thought processes. In accordance with Greene and Higgins’ recommendations, the cued recall took place directly after the first task, and focused on “critical incidents and contextual cues” (123): the highlighted words.

In addition to providing the higher reliability of converging methods, this task had a secondary goal: I wished to see if divergent intertexts applied at the word-level too. Often, when we think of what it means to interpret, we think of novels, poems, or political speeches. But single words are just as open to interpretation, and have their own contextually-sensitive intertextual geographies. In addition, if these divergent word-level understandings were tied to intertexts of the expertise of daily life, then I would have even more evidence for recommending the inclusion of “non-traditional” expertise in the CLC’s “Roads to Work” program — particularly in the part of the program which revolves around work narratives.

**Coding for Task 2**

Task 2 was coded with the same coding scheme used for Task 1.

**Task 3 — Rival Interpretations**

Gaining “Rival Hypotheses” was the third and final method for this study. Frank and Keith participated in this method. Gaining “rivals” involved asking the two subjects (both maintenance workers at Carnegie Mellon University) to respond to interpretations and intertexts from previous subjects. For example, I asked Subject 3: “one of my previous subjects said that they though maintenance men didn’t have to think very hard in their jobs. What is your take on that?”

Linda Flower defines Rival Hypotheses as such:

- Rival hypothesis thinking (or RH) is an attitude toward inquiry. Bold enough to live with
uncertainty, it addresses itself to genuinely open questions. Rather than mounting a pro/con argument in support of a thesis it intends to prove, it poses problems that may admit multiple answers.

• Gaining Rival Hypotheses is a strategy for inquiry that not only seeks out other voices, alternative interpretations, and their supporting evidence, but actively generates strong rival hypotheses that challenge and conditionize favored claims — including one’s own.

• Gaining Rival Hypotheses is finally a constructive process, attempting to build a “better” conclusion in the midst of strong alternatives (2).

In this sense, rival hypotheses do not always replace the original interpretations or intertextual links; rather, “rivals” flesh out the interpretive milieu by including viewpoints from as many angles as possible (including angles which are traditionally left out or deemed as “non-expert”). Rivals are alternative explanations, but they are explanations which widen the context instead of replacing it with another one (in other words, this sense of rival hypotheses is not simply “you’re wrong and I’m right,” but rather, how we might all be “right” in different ways). Rival hypotheses do not mean that problem negotiators are open for a “free-for-all;” rather, they allow problem-solvers to choose better solutions from a more widely-defined context. In this specific study, I wished to see how people who were living as maintenance men reacted to the interpretations of people similar to typical mentors (i.e., educated, well-meaning white people). If I found that their rival interpretations were directly opposed to other subjects’ interpretations, then we as educators might need to think about how to approach the story-telling section of “Roads to Work” by inviting diverse interpretations to the table.

Coding for Task 3

Task three was coded for “rival interpretations,” which was operationally defined as the linguistic representations a subject constructed from verbally-given interpretive statements from prior subjects (statements which had been previously coded in Task 1 and Task 2), in response to “One of my earlier subjects said “X.” What is your interpretation of this statement?”

Results and Discussion

The data yielded a rich array of interpretations, intertextual links, and rival interpretations. These interpretations and intertexts sometimes repeated each other, but on the whole the various readings led to an interpretive and intertextual picture which would not have been possible with single readings, or with readings from a homogeneous population. I have mapped only two of the sentences (see Figures 7 and 8), but this mapping provides a window into the range and quality of the data. From the coded results, I have 11 findings:

1. Readers who make interpretations based on short-term or second-hand experience do not admit to its subjectivity, or qualify their interpretation as “only part of the picture,” even if their personal experiences are obviously limited.

In other words, their interpretations, which were based on their experience with the text in relation to themselves, were not admitted as being subjective. It is not surprising that we take our
textual interpretations from our personal experiences — how can we not? Such readings are even more probable when we are reading with strategies which have become tacit from years of use. Greg made this remark about his college job as a maintenance worker:

Greg: I worked as a maintenance person in college, low paying, did fixer-upper stuff, very low, not much glory in it.

Greg’s experience is strictly short-term: he knew that he would be going to greener pastures after college. When I told Frank, a maintenance worker, about Greg’s understanding of maintenance, he had a different opinion:

Frank: But we work together with catering, info desk, coordinator operator, if there’s a problem with how many people can be accommodated in any of these rooms, they come to us and we try to work those things out. And we make sure, everybody have everything they want in order to conduct a meeting, presentation, seminar, whatever, with no...we don’t ask anything, all we ask is that after that event is over you say, hey, those guys did a good job, and that’s what we pride ourselves on.(emphasis added).

Frank obviously takes pride out of his work, and he has experience and history to back up such a statement. Another college-educated subject, Tracy, interpreted the word “maintenance” as such:

Tracy: They are people who fix broken things, machinery or edifices. Not a janitor. Not highly educated. Didn’t do well in traditional academic course work.

Her personal experiences behind this interpretations:

Tracy: I distrust maintenance people who have come into my apartment because they are sleazy or will steal.

Tracy is working from neither first-hand or short-term experience: her opinions about maintenance workers stem from living in apartments and dorms which employed maintenance men. Keith, a custodial worker at Carnegie Mellon, had a matter-of-fact rival interpretation for this Tracy’s depiction of the sticky-fingered maintenance man:

Keith: Sometimes people put 5 dollars on the floor, leave 5 dollars in the drawer. But the money that I’m making, see, I can’t see why should I, I can’t see nobody stealing anything anyway, because you are working for it and you are making money anyway. I think that is a disease or something else, so I don’t think, you know.

The rival interpretations of the two maintenance workers are backed up by solid evidence: Frank does take pride in his work, and Keith does not steal, even when people try to get him to. Such rival interpretations can be of vital importance to young people who are entering the world of work, and who might become (temporarily or permanently) maintenance or janitorial staff.

2. The research tool was couched in academic terms which were inaccessible or difficult to access for people not well acquainted with academia. The questions surely effected how subjects did a reading.
Rigid reading format may not be the best way to get the whole intertextual picture, especially if we access our intertextual geographies with different intellectual strategies. Keith had much difficulty with Task 1, not understanding what I wanted from “interpretations.” While other subjects talked at great length about intertexts to the sentence “this is where the stereotypes came in”, Keith can only say “too many of them.” As I watched his obvious discomfort and long silences during the task, I realized that my tool was based on elitist assumptions about reading — and couched in rhetorical conventions that had been reified as “good,” “proper,” and “easy to understand.” I stopped him after he completed Task 1, and verbally questioned him for Task 2: instead of saying “what is your interpretation,” I asked “what do you think of the word ‘money’?” He was much more comfortable during the second task. The third task, however, was where Keith excelled. In this task, I asked him to speak to me from his own experience. For example, when I asked him about the stereotype that maintenance men aren’t bright, he replied:

Keith: I don’t think so. There ain’t too many jobs out there that makes as much as us, and, for one, there’s people who come out of colleges, with degrees, that can’t even get a job! People don’t want to work maintenance, they’d rather work fast food jobs, or at McDonalds, rather than maintenance, that is making this kind of money and for years and years won’t do nothing. I think that’s unfair. Maybe that person, college wasn’t for them, so how can they judge person because they got a high school diploma and that person has a college diploma? That person, as long as he is doing something, and not doing nothing, going to jail or something. So I think that is wrong. I laugh at them because I make more money than them anyway.

While Keith couldn’t talk about stereotypes during the first task, he became animated, passionate, and eloquent when verbally confronted with a stereotype from one of the other subjects. In addition, the rival interpretation, based in the real experience of someone working this job as a career, provides important information to non-college-bound teens who may be looking for jobs: he makes good money, perhaps even more than some college graduates do. This valuable information would not have been accessed from Keith if we had not used several methods to collect data from him. Such a reading teaches researchers a valuable lesson: problematize your methodology and your tools before you begin your data collection. In fact, it would have been a good idea for me to pilot this methodology before I used it to collect hard data.

3. The two maintenance workers did not produce equal readings; therefore, strategies for acquiring divergent readings should not rely on only one person to stand as the spokesperson for “Other,” or at least should admit to the limitations of their subject pool, and thus the limitations of their interpretations and their intertexts.

While the two subjects who worked at Carnegie Mellon did concur on several points, Frank produced direct rivals to some of Keith’s statements. For example, Keith talked about the stress of his job:

Keith: It’s a stressful job, a stressful job. Tearing behind kids, dealing with management, being over worked. It’s something that you don’t know, and the hassles that you go through. I mean a regular person probably couldn’t even go through this, would not work this job. I know this for a fact.
Frank, however, feels differently about the stress-level of his job:

Frank: Me personally I don’t do stress. My job is to clean, I’m a cleaner, and I’ve come to believe that is what I’m the best at. So as far as like them demanding you to do so much work in a certain period of time, yeah, they do that. They expect one person to clean a whole building which is impossible. And once they find a good worker, they try to use that worker up, they try to get the most out of that worker they can. . . I’m here for eight hours. That’s my thing. I’m here for eight hours. Now, whether I clean my area or whether I clean someone else’s area, I’m cleaning. I’m just doing my job.

We could hypothesize several reasons for Frank’s different mindset (perhaps his 18 years on the job versus Keith’s 3 years on the job), but the reason is less important than the lesson. Too often, we as liberal academics expect a single “minority” to stand as the spokesperson for their whole culture and experience. But maintenance workers are individuals with their own unique intertextual geographies just as much as graduate students or professors or our own children are. And it should not just be the inherent classism and racism in such an academic move that spurs us on to see “others” as individuals: Frank gave important rivals to Keith’s statements. And Keith made statements which Frank did not (e.g., his statement about how much money he makes). If we wish to collaboratively construct an image of work, we must ask several different people from the same positions in life to help us build that image.

4. Construction and negotiation of intertexts to build interpretations was evident in the rival interpretations of Frank and Keith, thus building an argument that collaborative reading and writing is conducive to this higher level of problem representation.

The four subjects who did not engage in rival interpretations averaged 1.5 episodes of negotiation in all of their data samples. But Keith engaged in seven episodes of negotiation, and Frank engaged in six episodes of negotiation. One of the subjects who did not engage in any episodes of negotiation listed one of his intertexts as “being forced to do stuff which was below me.” When I asked Keith to rival the idea that some jobs are “below” people, Keith talks about the give-and-take nature of working at jobs which may not be seen on the surface as ideal:

Keith: While they are working at that kind of job, they don’t understand, they can keep working on what they want, what they went for in college. That is their problem. They got a problem, they above everybody else. Most of those people never had a hard life. Their parents did everything for them. They didn’t have to struggle, didn’t have to clean, they didn’t have to do none of that. That is up in their upbringing anyway.

Keith is negotiating between the goals of making money and fulfilling career aspirations, with additional insights into why the other subjects might view jobs as “below them.” Frank also engages in negotiation when he rivals this same intertext:

Frank: Well, that’s a individual personal feeling because, if you got a do a job you’ve got to make the best of it. That was what I was taught when I was in grade school. If you are a fireman, try to be the best firemen. If you are a garbage man, try to be the best garbage man, if you are a custodian, and you gotta be a custodian, be the best custodian you can be. Just because you gotta clean toilets — just think of an orderly who has to clean shit — you know?
So, to say that, I wouldn’t say that this job was below me because, it depends on what your standards is. If I had set myself up high, to be a doctor or something, I wouldn’t put myself in this position. Situations usually lead a person into the lifestyle he has to live, not that he choose to live, but that he has to live, and my dad said you do the best you could with what you have. And that is when you develop stress is when you say well this job is beneath me. But you’ve been doing it for eight years, or eighteen.

This data backs up Flower’s argument that collaborative readings increase the possibility of the negotiation of intertexts and interpretations (1994). While none of the subjects produced interpretations backed up by negotiated intertextual links (at least not that they admitted to), the situation changed when the two maintenance men were asked to make sense out of others’ ideas. Therefore, collaborative reading and writing, particularly when it includes non-traditional viewpoints, is conducive to the higher-leveled cognitive feats which lead to negotiated, and thus more inclusive, meanings.

5. Repeated information and intertexts happened most often between the three white college-educated subjects. Such a degree of repetition suggests that the search for diverse interpretations should range outside of the classroom and/or traditional academic settings.

Greg, Tracy, and Susan, the three white, college-educated subjects, made interpretive remarks that maintenance men were either “not smart” or did not have “mentally tasking” jobs. Divergent interpretations did not occur until the maintenance workers were asked to rival this belief. Frank not only argued for the intellectual work that goes into being a good maintenance worker, but qualified that argument by admitting that some types of maintenance work are not that mind-tasking (note that Frank’s rival interpretation includes sophisticated moves of negotiating conflicting, complex issues):

Frank: It depends on the type of maintenance work that they doing. Now if you are just cleaning the toilet and sweeping the floor, no, it doesn’t take a brainiac to do that, it just takes someone who is willing to come in, sweep the floor, and clean the toilet. But when you have to do things as far as know how many people could accommodate certain rooms, and you have to know different set ups for different groups, and you have to know the diameter and the width and the length of certain rooms to accommodate other people, it’s going to take some thinking. I mean, you don’t have to have a college degree to be a custodian or a maintenance worker, no. When you look at as far as maintenance is concerned, you have to know how many watts is coming out of your light fixture or your dead. You can’t just go up there with those type of things and say, OK, I can put up any type of bulb in here, you can’t do that. You’re going to have to know something about that light fixture. So, and far as the regulated temperature in the room, if a maintenance person has to figure out the regulated temperature in the room, how much is it going to take to heat this room up, how far to cool this room down, you have to know that. You can’t just look it up in a manual, you have to have some type of knowledge of it.

Frank’s rival interpretation has the ring of truth — but it is not something which was readily accessible to people who don’t live in the situation as Frank does.

Another subject, Mrs. Muloooley, had interesting interpretations of the original author’s wish to escape his workplace:
Mrs. Mulooley: I had a ball working. I would never have, there again, this is a generation thing, I get hostile about people who — if they are not going to do it, don’t take the job. If you are going to be a shoe man be a nice shoe man, if you are going to be a doctor, be a good doctor. I can’t associate with moping around, I like to be with people.

She also had something to say about her personal experiences (i.e., her intertexts) with maintenance workers from the standpoint of someone who employed maintenance men before she retired:

My husband and I took a job managing a string of apartments for college students. The title of his job was maintenance. There wasn’t anything he couldn’t do, he did it all himself. I rented the apartments, but I did take orders for maintenance. I couldn’t depend much on maintenance men, they did it in their own time, right or not. I had to learn how to do the jobs myself, go out at 4 a.m. and light the steam furnaces. I learned if you want something done, do it yourself.

These interpretations might seem to conflict — but employers and employees often conflict over the issue of quality of work, and this fact is important for young workers to know before they start their first jobs.

These community-member interpretations and intertexts also have implications for those who are interested in programs for social justice. If we collaborate on our reading, writing, and curricular design with only ourselves, we have not really accomplished much (other than raising our skills in academic-style collaboration). In order for collaborations to shed light from the world outside our Ivory Towers, we have to leave the Ivory Towers, and leave them in a way which will not be jamming our interpretations and language onto those of the communities we are conducting inquiry with.

6. The divergent intertexts suggest that differences are less due to mismatch in style than to mismatch in intertextual geography. The problem is less that we can’t communicate than that we don’t even think to try.

Although Keith’s experience with the research tool was telling, it has more to say about academic jargon and strategies than it does Keith’s ability to speak about his own experiences. Once I approached him with the language of everyday life (amazingly, I can speak it), it was easy for he and I to talk about issues of importance. Frank, who only participated in the rivalling task, was eloquent from the start. Although I don’t mean to downplay the importance of being sensitive to Intercultural Communication, and how our languages and codes might prevent communication with people who use other languages and codes, I believe that using “strange dialects” as an excuse to not even try could be a mistake. Perhaps one of the most important things to do is to put ourselves and our own interpretations on the line and take the first step of just asking.

7. Accessing diverse intertextual meanings might not lead to any kind of real world result, particularly if readers/writers give in to the urge to be empathetic.

As I listened to my two maintenance workers talk, I was often moved to sympathy and
empathy, and had the urge to say “Oh, that is terrible for you,” rather than continuing the inquiry into their rival interpretations. Keith, as he spoke his interpretation for the sentences mentioning the author’s father (who had a technician’s job, and who therefore could not give the author much money, see sentences 12 and 13 in Appendix 1), said:

Keith: My dad never had one of these jobs. I wish he did. I wish he did support me. He don’t give me no money no more. I wish he did.

It might have provided the CLC teens useful information if I had asked Keith how he made it to the position he is in now, with a job, wife, and children, without the support of a father — an issue which many of the teens face. But rather, I was overcome with sympathy and glossed over the issue.

On the other hand, when Frank mentioned the problems that he had with his manager, I was able to move beyond “just” empathy into inquiry. The entire episode is below:

Susan: I had some subjects say that when managers make you do more than you should then that is a bad thing.

Frank: I agree. Umm, if you put like, in this building or wherever I work, I do my work. If I’m doing my area and a manager comes to me, a supervisor comes to me and says we need you to go downstairs and mop a floor because there’s a spill down there, I will stop what I’m doing and go mop the floor, because I’m working for eight hours. Now, if it takes me an hour to mop that spill because someone done track the stickiness all the way down the hall, I’m not going to mop that track, I’m going to mop the hall. Now, if that means that my area didn’t get done, then it didn’t get done because you told me to go downstairs and mop. So, I’m here for eight hours. That’s my thing. I’m here for eight hours. Now, whether I clean my area or whether I clean someone else’s area, I’m cleaning. I’m just doing my job.

Susan: Some people said that if their manager asked them to do stuff like that they would just quit.

Frank: I can’t quit, I’ve got a family to support. I can go out and work two jobs and make the money I’m making here but I won’t have the benefits of this job. You know, the benefits is really what keeps me going, because I can send my son to the dentist and just [pay twenty bucks, and get a filling, a cleaning, and complete check up for twenty dollars so that's good. I can send him to the doctor for a checkup for two fifty. So, that helps me a lot. When you’ve got babies, that helps.

Susan: What would you do if you had a problem instead of just quitting?

Frank: Well I had a problem with a supervisor who approached me about coming in at a certain time and sort of yelling at me about it. I put him in his place. Told him to respect me as a person and I’ll respect you as a person. Ask me what the situation was and I’ll explain it to you. Don’t assume anything, cause when you do, you make it bad for the both of us. Since then, me and this supervisor have been on good terms ever since.

Frank provided me with practical information — information which could potentially help young
workers negotiate future problems with their employers — but how Frank dealt with his problem would not have been discovered if I had rested at a level of empathy about the “b.s.” he has to put up with, or that he has to keep working because of his children. I do not forward here a coldness of attitude towards our collaborators. Rather, our strategies should be foregrounded as both moves of empathy and inquiry — caring moves to unveil the intertextual geography that exists in Frank’s lived world. While retaining an empathetic spirit, interpretive strategies which access diverse readings can seek to put more evidence on the table, and can lead to a more fleshed-out intertextual geography.

8. The readings of the different subject yielded different types of information.

The subjects who were far removed from the careers of maintenance workers produced interpretations and intertexts which were impressions and generalizations about what it meant to work in maintenance. On the other hand, the three other subjects who had first hand experience produced narratives of first-hand experience — and these narratives often admitted to seeing the job of maintenance in more than one light (i.e., they were not always making generalizations). Greg said that maintenance people were “handsy-type” people; Tracy thought they were academic under-achievers; and Susan thought they were working in “demeaning” jobs. But Mrs. Mulooley recognized that the negative effects of her job were balanced by the people she worked with and her nice apartment. Keith thought that the stress was worth it because of the salary and the benefits. Frank agreed that some types of maintenance jobs were not mind-tasking, but argued that others required practical knowledge and thinking.

These differences are more than cosmetic: when Keith, Frank, and Mrs. Mulooley talk about their multi-leveled “balancing act” sense of their careers, they forwarded themselves as agents who made choices of their own free will. Tracy said that janitors “internalized the message of what it means to be a janitor, and therefore had disempowered themselves.” This image of a helpless object is countered by rival interpretations of choice, pride, and strategies for “making it” in a job that provides housing, clothing, money, and medicine to their families. This hard evidence of the agency of maintenance workers to make their own choices, and to balance the bad with the good (which is something we must all do in our careers) is invaluable information for young people beginning to work. It not only teaches how to solve problems at work: it also teaches that you have an innate power to do so.

9. The readings by the maintenance workers and the employer produced information which could be very useful to young people going on the market.

This last finding is perhaps the most important. The three readers who had experience with maintenance work and workers yielded enormous amounts of practical, helpful expertise. Below are stories of opportunity, patience, practicality, and the ability to balance the bad with the good:

Frank: [In this maintenance job] I do have good medical, I don’t pay for the doctors office and dental clinic, and I like and appreciate that. And the money they pay, we’re not going to be rich, but there are jobs out there that pay a lot less.

Mrs. Mulooley: When I was managing the [apartment complex], I stayed there for 12 years, and there were days I could have burned down the whole block, but I needed the money yes, and I had a lovely apartment, and I liked the people I worked with. I never stayed there because I needed the money. I was offered other jobs but I liked this one.
Mrs. Mulooley: I had a ball working. I would never have, there again, this is a generation thing, I get hostile about people who — if they are not going to do it, don’t take the job. If you are going to be a shoe man be a nice shoe man, if you are going to be a doctor, be a good doctor. I can’t associate with moping around, I like to be with people.

Keith: I get paid by the hour. As long as I work for them eight hours, they [management] can’t do nothing to me. This job is stressful, but you just have to take care of home. If you quit this job, what you gonna be? You are gonna have zero, no money or nothing.

Keith: While they [people who have higher career aspirations] are working at that kind of job, they don’t understand, they can keep working on what they want, what they went for in college. That is their problem. They got a problem, they above everybody else. Most of those people never had a hard life. Their parents did everything for them. They didn’t have to struggle, didn’t have to clean, they didn’t have to do none of that. That is up in their upbringing anyway.

Keith: If the money is right, and everything is there, the pension and everything else is there, I think you can make a career out of it [custodial work]. When you are young, I think you shouldn’t make it a career if everything else isn’t there, the money, the pension.

Keith, Frank, and Mrs. Mulooley offer advice that I could not have offered — and advice, I imagine, which would not come from people who worked “unsavory” jobs for only a few months (or never at all), always knowing that something better was in their future. They tell experience-laden stories of pride, self-respect, and duty — words which are not often associated with the jobs where non-college-bound youth are probably going to have to work. Keith, Frank, and Mrs. Mulooley are therefore offering us invisible intertexts (invisible to the other subjects, since the other subjects were not given access to any other reading than their own) which are therefore more than the exercise in multiculturalism and political correctness: they are offering words of wisdom.

Conclusion

If we are engaged in projects of social justice which have real results on real people, it is important for us to be critical about the information and interpretations that we give to and create with communities. Relying on narrow interpretive strategies, or strategies which privilege the academic world-view, might not lead to solutions or attitudes which are in reality conducive to social justice. If our views of the world are used to help at-risk teens begin their voyage on the road to work, then using our own necessarily limited interpretations of work can be leading the teens into a world part fantasy/part reality, with neither fantasy or reality being delineated or mapped in any fashion. It seems that all of the evidence leads to what James Wertsch calls “social cognition:”

mind is viewed . . . as something that “extends beyond the skin” . . . it is often socially distributed and it is connected to the notion of mediation. . the terms mind and mental action can appropriately be predicated of dyads and larger groups as well as of individuals. This is not to harken back to notions of collective consciousness that have been discounted in social psychology, rather it is to recognize the power of insight of Vygotsky (1978, 1987), Bruner (1986) . . . and others that mental activities such as memory and reasoning can be socially
When we make reading, writing, and acts of social justice collaborations which recognize diverse areas of expertise, we make our action a collective movement which is constructed from our single minds, and at the same time much more than any of our single minds could accomplish.

Too often, students are taught to read and write in the “right” way, and this decontextualized teaching of rules is often merely nothing more than an exercise — an exercise which Dewey and Freire would argue is more than meaningless: it is harmful to our political and cultural ideals of progressive education, social justice, and democracy. Calling up our limited intertexts and placing them in relief against the intertexts of others can teach us not only about how our own complex, multi-leveled, subjective worlds miss the mark, are close to the truth, or are based on subjective assumptions, but also are first steps to the construction and negotiation of reading which is conceptually literate, respectful our complex truths, and oriented towards reflective action.
Appendix 1: Task One.

Below is a story broken up into 14 separate sentences. You will be asked to read this story one sentence at a time (note: some of the sentences are more than one line long). After you read each sentence, you will be asked to answer two questions:

1. How do you interpret this sentence?
   For example, if the sentence were: “I like diet pop,” then your interpretation could be: “this sentence seems to say that someone likes to drink diet soda, like diet coke, which makes me think that the author wants to watch their weight or something.”

2. Which of your own personal experiences backed up your interpretation?
   From the same example of the diet soda, your personal experiences might be: “Well, I was on a diet once and I started to drink diet coke, because regular pop has 150 calories per can, so it made me think that the author may be on a diet.”

When you are ready to begin, move the top sheet of paper down until you see the first sentence. You may read it out loud if you wish, or you may wait until you have “found” your interpretation before you speak.

The very next job I had was at a Hills Department store.

It was one of those “I need a job. I don’t care what it is, I just want to make some money”-type of jobs.

Little did I know what they had in store for me.

When I interviewed with the manager, I told him I’d do whatever he wanted me to do.

The title of my job was “maintenance.”

This involved, among other things, cleaning the snack-bar area with my own little push cart of cleaning supplies, changing light bulbs, cleaning the bathrooms (Eeeewww!!), and mopping the floors at the end of the day.

This is where the stereotypes came in.

I felt like (and was treated like) the janitor at any elementary school.

People would talk to me as if I had the IQ of a coffee mug.

I would find myself moping around the store with a glum look on my face hoping that someone would take pity on me and take me as a hostage while they robbed the store.

It seemed like the only way out of there.
But I stuck with it, if only because I felt I needed the money.

I felt bad that my father had to support my brother and me on only his technician’s salary.

So I refused to take money from him unless I desperately needed it.

**Appendix 2: Task Two.**

Now I would like you to answer the same two questions about each of the highlighted words from the story. Not every sentence has a highlighted word, so just move the paper down until you find one (there are a total of 7 highlighted words). As a reminder, the two questions are:

1. How do you interpret this sentence?
2. Which of your own personal experiences backed up your interpretation?

The very next job I had was at a Hills Department store.

It was one of those “I need a job. I don’t care what it is, I just want to make some money”-type of jobs.

Little did I know what they had in store for me.

When I interviewed with the manager, I told him I’d do whatever he wanted me to do.

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So I refused to take money from him unless I desperately needed it.
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