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Activist Literacy in Shrinking Cities: Lessons for Urban Education

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Introduction

Throughout the world developed, modern cities are facing population decline on an unprecedented scale. Oswalt and Rieniets show that, over the last fifty years, 370 cities throughout the world with populations over 100,000 have shrunk by at least ten percent. Wide swaths of the United States are projecting double-digit declines in population in the coming decades. The problem of population decline is known well in the state of Michigan, particularly in cities like Flint, Lansing, Warren, and Detroit. While some parts of Michigan have grown, US Census data shows that the state as a whole is slowly losing population. (According to the US Census, the state lost 36,000 residents from 2005 to 2007.) However, activists working to address the challenges associated with population decline write and publish regularly about their own neighborhoods, and there are powerful ways that such writing can be used to enhance content-area literacy in classrooms.

Activists working in community-based organizations have responded to the depopulation crisis by writing about population decline in a positive or neutral way, instead of from a negative perspective more often associated with decline.[1] This movement has rallied around the word *shrinkage* to better articulate the changes that occur in cities when they depopulate, a term that refers to a smart decline ideology. This new language has allowed activists and planners to begin exploring creative and innovative ways for cities to successfully shrink. One site of this reconceptualization process has been at the community level where activists have embraced some or parts of this new shrinkage discourse. These activists use a variety of literacy artifacts, from neighborhood association newsletters and letters to the editor to reports, to engage with the shrinkage discourse and fight for change in their communities.

For children growing up in shrinking cities, these literacy artifacts can serve as vital tools in forming their own identities and attitudes about their home city. The sociologist, William Julius Wilson has documented how crime, unemployment and poverty are commonplace in shrinking cities and can weigh heavily on children's sense of self-worth and optimism. The discourse of decline and negativity can be injurious to children and even turn them off to literacy. In contrast, the shrinkage discourse provides an entrée for many of these children into a world of reading and writing that gives them confidence and pride in their community.

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Links Between Shrinkage Discourse and Content Area Literacy

Content area literacy (CAL) has received much attention in recent years and has become the current approach to literacy K-12. No longer is generic reading and writing considered enough for success

1 In August 2008, Forbes Magazine described U.S. cities with the greatest population loss rates as "dying cities". Beauregard documented how widespread this type of labeling has been in recent decades in the popular and academic literature in his book Voices of Decline.

in the content areas from elementary school on up. The content area literacy approach to literacy draws on ideas from writing across the curriculum (WAC) findings from the eighties and nineties about discipline-specific values concerning writing. Science, math, history and English teachers are being asked to see themselves as teachers of science literacy, math literacy etc., as seen in the works of Fynders and Hynds, as well as in Vacca and Vacca. Those of us who teach content area literacy for pre-service teachers are working to help these candidates build "literacy teacher" into their content area identities from the beginning.

In this research we ask: How can activist literacy be used in shrinking cities by content-area teachers to help empower youth? We begin by looking at the literacy artifacts of community-based organizations in three US cities with persistent population decline: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Youngstown, Ohio and Richmond, Virginia. We asked pre-service content areas teachers to aid us in exploring how these documents could be used in a content area classroom in ways that both connect students to their communities and involve them in appropriate content area learning.

Our analysis reveals that the literacy artifacts can be used in the classroom to engage students in the challenges their cities face. Examining these artifacts, which show the flexibility of the city to reinvent itself, can be an empowering, authentic activity for youth, and portends a brighter future for even the most distressed city. Here an opportunity exists to enhance students' understanding of content area literacy while attending to the challenges that they face in their own communities.

Brief Review of the Literature

Before reporting on the empirical findings of our research, we turn first to a conceptual review of the literature to frame our study. First, we introduce the topic of activist literacy and then explain its relationship to content-area literacy in classrooms. Next, after describing the theoretical basis for examining discourses theory, we frame the challenge of the shrinking city as a setting for this study.

What is Activist Literacy?

Literacy and activism have had a long relationship. Community activists get their messages out, ask for help, and build name recognition through written materials. Causes associated with change have had written materials representing their desires since antiquity. In modern times, activists produce written materials and disseminate these materials widely, enjoying accessible and inexpensive production methods. These brochures, announcements, posters, invitations and the like become part of the fabric of community life, a ubiquitous part of visits to stores, doctors, libraries and walks down the street.

In the realm of education, activism and literacy have been connected at theoretical and practical levels, often through the term "critical literacy." Ira Shor talks about critical literacy in the classroom as those practices that enable people to see beyond dominant accepted discourses and ideologies and imagine "how to act on the meaning to change the conditions it reflects" (129).

In his well-known teaching and advocacy projects with Brazilian peasants, Paulo Freire showed the reflexive nature of this relationship, helping his students to become literate and activists at the same time. Freire's method involved literacy instruction focused around issues close to the peasants, such as labor exploitation, poverty, food, work, building materials, so that "learning to read and write, the students would also be gaining the power to critique and act on their conditions" (Shor 47). In this same way, children in school who study new forms of language that reject the negativity of decline may be better prepared to address the changes at work in their neighborhoods.

Community service learning courses, especially in composition, have made it possible for students to get involved in writing materials for non profit or charitable organizations. Within this community service movement there has been some theorizing about the value of offering students the opportunity to actualize their role as "citizens" through such activity. At the secondary and elementary levels students get involved in community improvement events through non-profit organizations, using reading and writing skills. For example, hundreds of elementary school students read and wrote as part of a New York Department of Environmental Conservation water-sampling event along the Hudson River (Bowser). Activist literacy also encompasses the applied critical work students do in school. For example, students in writer-educator Linda Christensen's classroom

have written letters to editor about general problems of racism and sexism in the media (Christensen).

In her 2005 dissertation studying critical literacy in a composition classroom and an activist organization (Greenpeace), Virginia Crisco builds on the idea of critical literacy to define "literacy activism." Crisco writes, "Activist literacy augments critical literacy through the *enactment* of critical literacy in democratic contexts, and it is *not only* sponsored by educational contexts but also in community contexts" (24). Our study brings together educational and community contexts in the way that Crisco describes and focuses on an area which is has taken center stage in importance in recent years: content area literacy.

Activist Literacy as Content Area Literacy

A common set of principles and skills for all disciplines has emerged from CAL as well as discipline specific requirements. Some of the typical methods to be used and skills to be taught in all subject areas are graphic representation, vocabulary, reading strategies, general ideas about the writing process, critical reading and writing, and using real life applications. Examples of other, more subject-specific literacy preparation include writing of labs and specialized knowledge of relationships and vocabulary in science, reading primary documents and reading maps in social studies/history, differences between everyday word meanings and the meanings of those words in math and writing explanations of solutions to problems in math, and understanding figurative language and character development in English.

Literature disseminated by neighborhood groups asks its readers to interact with it in similar ways to those expected in CAL. Readers are asked to interact with excerpts from primary sources, read maps of neighborhood landmarks and proposed improvements, make critical judgments, learn about historical and current events and people, understand new vocabulary, understand relationships such as cause and effect, follow and apply mathematical calculations, and read all kinds of graphic representations.

The overlap between skills required to read activist literacy and those stressed by CAL teachers, along with the benefits suggested by our earlier discussion of community service learning, makes bringing activist literacy into the classroom an exciting opportunity for engaged learning of core research-based CAL skills.

Discourse theory

In the fields of urban planning and education, the relationship between reality and language are central. Our understanding of literacy draws on the theories of language that address the reflexive nature of language and reality. These theories of language, referred to as New Literacy Studies (e.g., Pahl and Rowsell 11), talk about language as being composed of discourses, ways of seeing the world, which position the language user, as well as the receiver, and influence the individual and collective understanding of self and reality. These discourses wield different amounts of power and influence, depending on their cultural dominance at any one moment in time. Discourses vie for power in the open market of culture.

The notion of discourses is particularly exciting for urban planners and educators for two reasons: (1) discourses tell a lot about the values of an individual or culture when analyzed, and (2) discourses can influence peoples' thinking and identities. Discourse theory, which posits that discourse offers people identities to be taken up (often called *subjectivities* or *subject positions*), gives urban planners and educators reason to hope for raising consciousness and generating positive change through a person's adoption of these identities. An example of this would be the Global Warming/Save the Planet Discourse, which has spread (perhaps beginning with Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* and the media coverage of that movie). The discourse appears to offer new identities for people of all ages to take up as "someone informed about Global Warming and trying to do something to help." These new identities did not exist before.

Data and Methods

Building on one of the author's (Justin's) research into policy and planning challenges faced by distressed cities, we examined three shrinking US cities: Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania), Youngstown (Ohio), and Richmond (Virginia). We selected these cities because they are each host to community-based organizations that employ a wide-range of literacy practices in their activism. For each city,

we collected at least three literacy artifacts (including newspapers, brochures, historical notes, and a Web page) from community organizations.

We employed critical discourse analysis in order to understand the key values, discourses, and subject positions made available by each literacy artifact. In the analysis, we looked particularly for examples of smart decline ideology introduced earlier in this paper. The goal of critical discourse analysis, outlined in work done by Fairclough and extended by Ivanic and other New Literacy Studies theorists, was to elucidate aspects of language that are generally invisible to people because they seem "natural." These aspects include at least one of the following: (1) the way language positions those who read and write it, so that they take on available identities, referred to as subject positions; (2) the way language draws on particular discourses—worldviews associated with institutions or groups having different amounts of power are expressed through language; (3) the way that language in a text may refer to other texts—referred to as intertextuality; and (4) the way that language is constitutive—shapes the user's identity and what subject positions are available generally.

The goals of critical discourse analysis illustrated above will be enacted in this study through the methodology of microanalysis. As characterized in work done by Bloome and Egan-Robertson and Willett, Solsken, and Wilson-Keenan, microanalysis allows the researcher to study a piece of text at the micro-level without losing sight of the macro-level. The researcher gains insight into the micro-level through categorizing small units of text, while at the same time, because the categories are inherently tied to larger "big-picture" ideas, the researcher can gain insight into the macro-level. Next, we needed an approach to take the findings from the discourse analysis and translate that into avenues for introducing activist literacy into the classroom. We accomplished that through two brainstorming sessions with content area secondary undergraduates. We met with two sets of undergraduates (thirty-four students in the first, thirty-two students in the second), presented them with the literacy artifacts and the results of the discourse analysis, and then had them work in teams with their fellow content area students.

Results

While the smart decline ideology (*shrinkage*) introduced earlier in the paper was not obliquely evident in the literacy artifacts, the discourses, values, and subject positions made available were largely sympathetic to smart decline and provides a useful insight into the workings of activist literacy practices. Table 1 (see Appendix) summarizes the discourses and values for three literacy artifacts, one from each study city. As the table illustrates, the community organizations used the literacy artifacts to express a range of discourses but leaned heavily on Working Collaboratively and Community Empowerment Discourses. In the Hazelwood Initiative, Inc. Brochure, there was evidence of the use of the Quality of Life Discourse, which is highly compatible with smart decline and suggests to its readers that quality of life, rather than growth should be the aim of activists.

As Table 1 indicates, the values embedded in the literacy artifacts are largely positive, laying out the possibilities for agency in affecting change. The exception to this is the example in the Waiting for the Future Report where a Hopelessness Discourse is employed for dramatic effect. Overall, in all the artifacts examined, throughout the three cities, the discourses used by the activists were intended to position their readers as agents for change, and in doing so *empowers* them. As the Gillies Creek Park Foundation Brochure reads "The story of Gillies Park began with just a few people asking how they could help improve the area." Margaret Mead has oft been quoted as saying, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." People can be empowered to fight for change in their communities and in their neighborhoods when success stories are told and retold both orally and in print. The values of fighting the status quo and building a better future (together) are evident throughout these artifacts and form the basis for the second phase of the research.

The brainstorming sessions with undergraduate pre-service teachers revealed that the values and discourses embraced by the community organizations had very real potential for supporting urban education curriculum in the content areas. In Table 2 (see Appendix) we present a summary of the results of the brainstorming session, with ideas for incorporating the literacy artifacts into secondary

education classrooms in shrinking cities. For each content area, Math, History/Social Studies, English, and Science, the brainstorming sessions resulted in at least two ideas for utilizing the literacy artifacts. While some of the ideas were narrow and connected to specific curriculum (for example, the idea of juxtaposing the Waiting for the Future report for Youngstown with *To Kill a Mockingbird)*, other ideas were more general and less tied to a particular curriculum, like connecting generic history lessons to literacy artifacts' recounting of local history.

Discussion

The results of the discourse analysis and the brainstorming session with pre-service teachers yielded promising results. The sorts of discourses revealed in the literacy activist artifacts are mainly empowering discourses. These discourses, which value collaboration, tie to history and the community, have stature in their own right, but are often overshadowed by the more dominant discourses associated with capitalism and individualism. Their appearance in these artifacts means that readers will have a chance to take up these discourses and the identities associated with them, perhaps for the first time for some. For the reasons scholars and educators associated with New Literacy Studies have cited, it promises to be an empowering experience for students to interact with these discourses, particularly as teachers and community organizers offer students opportunities and show them how to engage and contribute to the discourses. By reading these texts and studying them in the classroom, students will have available to them the values and identities associated with working for positive change in the neighborhood and city. In the cases where there might be conflicting discourses, e.g., when Hopelessness Discourse shows up in contrast with Community Empowerment Discourse, students can be asked to critically examine the problems and possible solutions these discourses describe.

In addition to the benefits of access to new discourses and identities, students may engage with activist literacy artifacts through teacher-initiated activities that may be considered literacy work of any content area class. The pre-service content area teachers, very familiar with methods for teaching literacy in their content area, found many ways that they could use the artifacts in their subject area classes. Their suggestions echoed the state and national standards for learning and teaching in their subject areas. An example, they imagined projects that involved using the artifacts to give students experience interacting with primary documents, maps, scientific findings, historical secondary sources, and figurative language. Additionally, they thought of ways to actively engage students in brainstorming ways to extend what the community group was doing. As a result of such lessons, students would write, collect data, interview people and analyze written, mathematical and scientific information and data. By having students examine and write about strategies and artifacts of activists, teachers can enhance opportunities of content area literacy for students.

Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the potential for literacy artifacts in shrinking cities to be used in content area teaching. We found that there is great potential for such a pedagogical approach and recommend further research that could test the effectiveness and utility of using these types of artifacts in classrooms. Activist literacy exposes students to potentially empowering discourses they might not otherwise be exposed to. In addition, activist literacy can provide the opportunity for teachers to engage students in activities well suited to the goals of the content area classroom.

We recommend that teachers working in shrinking cities attempt to link literacy artifacts with content area lessons and find ways to track and measure the impact those innovations have on students' identities and attitudes towards their own neighborhoods. The research reported here also suggests that the use of literacy artifacts may have greater potential for connecting students with their communities both in shrinking cities and growing cities.

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Appendix

Table 1: Discourses and values from literacy artifacts

Literacy Artifact	City	Discourses Present	Excerpts	Values
The Gillies Creek Park Foundation Brochure	Richmond	Working Collaboratively Discourse	"The…Foundation is working with the City of Richmond to connect a series of new and existing parks…"	Teamwork, working within the system, cooperation
		Community Empowerment Discourse	"The story of Gillies Creek Park began with just a few people asking how they could help improve the area"	Change is possible, agency matters, individuals count
		Cultural and Historic Preservation Discourse	"This effort faithfully maintains existing properties, with each retaining its current identity and features…. The proposed park system encompasses areas that are rich in local and national historical significance."	Celebrate the past, capitalize on history and culture
"Waiting for the Future" Report	Youngstown	Community Empowerment Discourse	"…the people of Youngstown can find hope for the future when they look to the small signs of progress around them…"(p.3) "…people can start to share ideas and hear about some of the positive things that are happening." (p. 38).	Change is possible, agency matters, individuals count
		Hopelessness Discourse	"…the community is waiting for someone or something to move it ahead." (p.2) "People wonder aloud how, and if, the city could survive another blow" (p.7)	Positive change in unlikely, structural forces matter, individuals can do little

Table 1: Discourses and values from literacy artifacts

Literacy Artifact	City	Discourses Present	Excerpts	Values
	Youngstown	Working Collaboratively Discourse	"...they need to find a way to come together to define their priorities and set a comon direction for moving ahead."	Positive change is possible through coming together
Hazelwood Initiative Inc. Brochure	Pittsburgh	Working Collaboratively Discourse	"...the Hazelwood Initiative can solve neighborhood problems and get people in the neighborhood to work together."	Positive change is possible through coming together
		Community Empowerment Discourse	"The Hazelwood Initiative is guided not by outside forces, but by the collective vision and participation of our community members."	Outsiders do not control residents destiny, agency matters, individuals can make a difference
		Quality of Life Discourse	"Founded in 1994 to improve the quality of life in our neighborhood.... With your knowledge, abilities, and commitment, the Hazelwood Initiative can do even more to enhance the community."	Quality of life in the community can be enhanced.

Comments: these literacy artifacts drew on discourses that avoided the conventional growth-oriented economic development discourse commonly present in official government documents and media stories.

Table 2 – Results from Brainstorming Session with Undergraduate Pre-Service Secondary Teachers

Math • Collect data on population and demographic change over time and make mathematical calculations. Examine what was happening historically at the time of population loss (in the neighborhood, the city, or the country). • Analyze things done with numbers and statistics, students could create own idea-fundraiser and what they would do with funds (figure out how much money they would have to work with, what would you do with the vacant land-calculate acreage.
Social Studies/History • Creative writing looking at neighborhood's history, what was there and is not there today. • Write about why historic properties should be protected as part of funding proposals to state and federal government agencies. A class lesson on that funding process. • Have students brainstorm their own ideas for small projects that compliment local organizations small-scale efforts. • Connect generic history lessons to literacy artifacts' recounting of local history. • Teach about industrialization and how it relates to Hazelwood, look at family history to see if it fits in with history of industrialization as written in pamphlet, have students work on timelines for area, talk about preserving history-what purpose that could serve-visit old rehabbed historic site.
English • Juxtapose Youngstown community report with To Kill a Mockingbird. • Pull out literary themes (racial tensions, economic conditions) and see how they play out in a real neighborhood. • Collaborate with Science for planting to contribute. Inform with press release—cover nonfiction writing, pick out metaphors and why pamphlets use metaphors.
Science • Environmental/Earth science class, field trip to park location—tree identification. Test water quality. Examine landfill, study erosion. • Study the effects of new building (i.e., ball fields, park facilities) on environmental conditions. • Talk about water quality, erosion; field trips: wildlife, trees, talk about process of capping pollution • Create brochure showing all services and resources and events focusing on Hispanic population. Incorporate vocabulary.