Models of power and the deletion of participation in a classroom literacy event

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This article uses the analytic lens of power relations and models of power to examine how the participation of two students in an urban US eighth-grade English language arts class was symbolically and literally deleted. The researcher asks why do some students fail despite being placed in a technologically rich educational environment that ostensibly draws on best practices? Drawing on data collected during an academic year, the author uses a telling case of a dyad engaged in on-line research and the creation of a PowerPoint presentation to illustrate how the students try to participate and complete the assignment but experience failure. The author raises questions about the context of the students’ lives as well as the nature of the classroom instruction and assessment structure. It is argued that further research into the nature of participation is needed to address the lack of student success in urban schools.

As part of an interdisciplinary project in an urban junior high school, Grant, a 14-year-old African American male, and Hannah, a 14-year-old European American female, were teamed up to research a country’s flag and create a PowerPoint presentation that explained the symbolism of the flag. Each set of partners was to use a MacBook from the school’s laptop cart to do the research and create the presentation. For the 80-minute class, the two struggled to negotiate the use of a laptop and responsibility for the task, at one point pulling in the teacher to mediate. By the end of the class, Grant had taken over the task, collected the required information and placed it into a PowerPoint presentation while Hannah sat next to him. Hannah’s only responsibility was to save the presentation to her flash drive, but she did so incorrectly and the work was lost. When the class met again, the teacher told the two students to redo the assignment, but both refused to do so and consequently failed the assignment.

The problem of (non-)participation

Why do some students succeed and others fail even when it appears as if all the pieces are in place to support student learning and success? In this article, I use a ‘telling case’ (Mitchell, 1984), which is neither representative nor generalisable but instead allows the researcher to explore theoretical issues not previously apparent, and to explore how the
two students described above failed the in-class assignment. I suggest that the concept of models of power as an analytic lens can provide insight into the interactions between the students, the teacher and students, and within institutional and societal contexts, which result in what I call the deletion of participation or the construction of failure in the classroom. The term ‘deletion of participation’ is inspired by Schegloff’s (1986) concept of sequential deletion in which an individual’s contributions to a conversation are in essence erased by the continued inattention to their utterances by other members of the conversational group. Schegloff’s concept, however, does not take into account the role the individual plays in how the deletion occurs. By framing the deletion of participation through the concept of models of power which describes the shifts or circulations of power (Foucault, 1980) within an event, we can develop an understanding that participation is discursively co-constructed by all the participants rather than being an individual act of resistance or compliance or that the individual is a passive victim.

The concept of deletion of participation arose out of an initial research question that asked how do students draw on their knowledge of digital tools in order to participate in school literacy learning activities? Specifically, I was seeking to understand how the digital divide (Lazarus & Mora, 2000) or participation gap (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robinson & Weigel, 2006) operates within schools and what the implications are of that gap for student learning. Initial analysis of the video data and field notes revealed that unfamiliarity with technology led to the literal deletion of the students’ participation. However, I was unsatisfied with this rather simplistic answer and returned to the data in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of what had occurred. I found that when viewed through the lens of power, the larger pattern of deletion of participation demonstrated that knowledge of digital technology together with the discursive construction of participation through shifts in power and subject positioning contributed to the students’ ability to participate.

To understand how participation was constructed, I turn to the New Literacy Studies (NLS) to define literacy and consider notions of power. Following a review of the literature on participation in learning environments, I describe the study from which I draw this data. Based on the findings of this study, I conclude with a discussion of implications for teaching and research.

The social nature of literacy, power and learning

My approach to participation in literacy learning is informed by the NLS stance that literacy is context specific and socially situated (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanić, 2000; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Street, 1995, 2003). The NLS defines literacy as a social practice (Street, 1995) wherein we use text for culturally meaningful purposes within culturally meaningful activities (Gee, 2000). Furthermore, what counts as literate behaviour is ideologically bound and defined through relations of power (Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Street, 1995).

Power, as conceptualised within the NLS, tends to follow a critical framework, which focuses on the dichotomous issues of dominance, marginalisation and resistance, legitimatisation and negation, inclusion and exclusion (Janks, 2009; Street, 2003). However, following the Foucauldian model, the NLS clarifies that these dichotomies do not exist a priori but are constructed in interaction and are fluid (Foucault, 1980). In this view, language is social action and is linked to ideological forces (Fairclough, 1995), and
language, identity, activities and social institutions constantly build and rebuild each other over time (Gee, 1999). Therefore, who holds power at any given moment, how much power they hold and what kind of power is held can be shifted through discursive moves.

Given the above conceptualisations of power, it is necessary to place a local literacy event, such as the creation of a PowerPoint presentation, within the larger context in which it occurs. The concept of the literacy event is taken from Heath (1982) who defines an event as ‘occasions in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of a participant’s interactions and their interpretative processes’ (p. 50). Starting from this definition, Barton and Hamilton (2005) describe literacy events as identifiable and bounded interactions with texts that are part of literacy practices, and literacy practices are namable ways of using literacy within specific areas of life and include observable social relations. Barton and Hamilton explain that literacy practices exist within social patterns, which show that some practices are more dominant, more significant to the institution in which they are embedded and tied to issues of power within the institution.

Drawing from the work of Wenger (1998), Smith (1999), Latour (1987) and Law (1994), Barton and Hamilton (2005) argue that power within an institution is accrued in networks through reifications, which is the process of turning an abstract concept into namable thing. Through the process of reification, we project our meanings into the world then perceive them as existing and having a reality of their own (Tusting, 2005). According to Wenger, reification is also a product of participation, and Hamilton and Barton suggest that these reifications, which are also literacy artefacts, serve to ‘stand in for absent but interested human actions and are the means by which people and activities are incorporated into bigger networks of power’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 30). This ‘folding in’ (Brandt & Clinton, 2002), whereby an individual’s influence is extended by an artefact, becomes particularly salient when considering how texts such as worksheets, PowerPoint presentations and laptop computers function within the literacy event described in this article. Specifically, I suggest that how power circulates within a classroom setting or literacy event contributes to how students are positioned for participation and whether that participation is seen and acknowledged within the construct of the classroom or if participation is rendered invisible or deleted.

Within a literacy event, Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto and Shuart-Faris (2005) identify three ways of understanding power relations. The first, they write, is power as product in which power is seen as a quantifiable commodity that can be exchanged for something else. In this model, a person either has power or does not. The second, according to Bloome and colleagues is the Foucauldian model of power as process. In this model, power shifts from one situation to another and is always contested, dialogic and maintained through structures of surveillance. The third model of power identified by Bloome and colleagues is power as caring relations. Power as caring relations, while seeming to fall within the power as process model, differs in that the concept of power itself is reconceptualised (Bloome et al., 2005). Whereas power as process involves surveillance (both external and internal) and the locus of power is continually contested, power as caring relations is not coercive but instead is seen as having the potential to bring people together for mutual benefit and involves a ‘reciprocal and multidimensional process involving action, effort, achievement, accountability, respect, self-determination for self, community, and others, and responsiveness’ (Bloome et al., 2005, p. 165). Power as caring relations is one of process, but the focus is on the well-being of individuals and the health of the community rather than establishing dominance and subordination.
When considering issues of power, Bloome et al. (2005) also remind us that the power within a classroom is constructed through at least three levels of power relations: (a) between students and teachers; (b) among students; and (c) between the students and the school as a social institution. If we analyse a literacy event through the lens of power as product, we will most likely focus on teacher/student relationships and student/school relationships in that the institution and the teacher, as an agent of the institution, determine what counts and does not count within the context of schooling. When using a power as process model, we focus on the tensions within student and teacher relationships and among students. Such an analysis might lead us to consider how students contest classroom rules and how teachers react by implementing disciplinary measures. The lens of power as caring relations leads us to consider teacher/student relationships, student/student relationships and student/community/institution relationships but to do so with attention to how those relationships build a mutually beneficial environment. Applying the theoretical and analytic frames of relations of power and models of power to the described literacy event reveals different insights into what occurred within the moments discussed in this article. These insights are explored in the findings and discussion sections.

Thus far, I have discussed the relationship between literacy and power and how power is discursively constructed. Here, I turn to the concomitant understanding that just as literacy is a social act, so too is learning. This view suggests that human development occurs within the social world and that learning happens through scaffolded participation in culturally meaningful activities (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990, 2003). In other words, learning can be seen through a person’s changing participation (Rogoff, 1990, 2003). Goodwin and Goodwin (2004) define participation as ‘actions demonstrating forms of involvement performed by parties within evolving structures of talk’ (p. 232). Learning is manifested through changing participation with the learner being able to accomplish tasks on his or her own that previously could be accomplished only with the guidance of another more experienced member of the community (Rogoff, 1990, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978).

The move to situate literacy and learning within social contexts is part of what Gee (2000) calls the social turn in which ‘knowledge and meaning are seen as emerging from social practices or activities in which people, environments, tools, technologies, objects, words, acts, and symbols are all linked to (“networked” with) each other and dynamically interact with and on each other’ (p. 184). As such, if interactions are intrinsic to the construction of literacy, learning and power, and how people are positioned is constituted by circulations of power, then understanding those constructs requires analysis of interactions.

**Literature review**

This section reviews the research literature in order to understand the complex nature of participation and how the experience of individuals and the context of the learning environment interact to create opportunities for participation in literacy learning. Studies in linguistic anthropology and education have focused on participation since the 1970s (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004). Analysis of participation is evident in work such as Larson (1999) and Larson and Maier (2000) who examine the role of participation structures in supporting early literacy development. Kong and Pearson (2003) analyse the participation...
structures of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds who develop within a learning environment that includes the gradual turning over of responsibilities to students during book clubs. Analysis of the integration of authentic activities into the classroom also shows how students are able to first observe and then take up a variety of literacy practices (Neuman & Roskos, 1997). These studies, among others, show the value of collaborative classroom structures in which students are guided by the teacher towards the types of literate behaviours that are valued within the classroom and within dominant society.

The previously described studies explore successful participation but few studies explore the construction of non-participation. One study that offers insight is that of Tholander and Aronsson (2003). Tholander and Aronsson (2003) shed light on the question of non-participation through their investigation of how students position themselves and their peers as teachers and students. They argue that positionings are not fixed, but are discursive moves that can and do shift during the course of an event. Using Goffman’s (1981) conceptualisations of how participants take up positions within a participation framework, Tholander and Aronsson explore the phenomenon they name subteaching and demonstrate that student/teacher relationships, including that of resistance, are reproduced within these subteaching moments. The authors demonstrate how student interaction serves to regulate student behaviour and involvement in various group activities. As the authors show, task completion is an outcome of group interaction and the various roles taken up within the group rather than being a matter of the task itself. Tholander and Aronsson’s work demonstrates that the construction of participation is the result of complex interactions.

Additional insights into the nature of participation have been provided by examinations of on-line learning environments. The evidence indicates that successful participation in on-line learning depends on commitment from students (Ikpeze, 2007) and teacher scaffolding (Grisham & Wolsey, 2006). Other factors have also been identified as variables in how people participate in digitally mediated learning activities (Barron, 2004; Prinsen, Volman & Terwel, 2007). For example, Prinsen and colleagues found that gender, the level of computer skill, the level of reading comprehension, popularity and being children of immigrant parents affect participation as measured by the number of words contributed to an on-line discussion.

These studies demonstrate the complex nature of participation. The lived experience of individuals and the context of the learning environment interact to construct how learning occurs and what participation looks like. Research in classrooms and on-line has demonstrated how participation is constructed and what the implications are for learning. This article seeks to build on our understandings of participation by exploring how even when students participate, that participation can be rendered invisible.

Methods

Data were collected using participant/observation and included 37.5 hours of field notes and 6 hours of classroom video. Five 20-minute semistructured interviews with small groups of students were video recorded. The teacher participated in three audio-recorded semiformal interviews and weekly informal interviews through the school year. Public records regarding the design and make-up of the school district and the school, as well as public documents about the city, also served to build context for the teaching environment.
Context of the study

Thus far I have examined the research literature on participation as well as theoretical perspectives on literacy, learning and power. Given the theoretical stance that literacy and learning are social and are embedded within social, historical and political contexts, this next section describes the district, school, classroom, teacher and students.

The study took place in an urban eighth-grade English/language arts classroom in a school I call Community Magnet. Community Magnet is one of 21 secondary schools in city school district (CSD), which is the centralised district of a midsized city in Western New York State. CSD, one of the largest urban districts in New York State outside of the New York City school system, is over 80% African American and Latino. Community Magnet is the smallest secondary school within the district and houses approximately 400 students from Grades 7 to 12. The eighth-grade class from which the data in this article are taken contained 20 students. Like the school district, Community Magnet has a large number of students living in poverty as measured by free and reduced lunch rates.

The school’s mission explicitly states that learning occurs outside the walls of the school and is based on inquiry, although students take traditional courses such as English language arts, maths, science and social studies. Community Magnet uses an expeditionary learning model for seventh and eighth grade, and teachers have the same set of students for those 2 years. Expeditionary learning is a cross-disciplinary curriculum model that involves in-depth study of issues and questions through student engagement in the community, projects and service. Community experts are brought into the school and students are taken to the field as part of the learning experience. Additionally, teachers are assigned a set of 18 students for an ‘extended class’ that meets once a day for 1 hour for academic advisement and social/emotional support. The school has weekly meetings for school-wide decision-making, and students are required to engage in community service. These facets of the school support development of ‘action, effort, achievement, accountability, respect, self-determination’ (Bloome et al., 2005, p. 165) that is consistent with the model of power as caring relations.

Formal assessment occurs through 10-week report cards. Students receive a pass or fail for each class rather than number or letter grades and assessment includes narratives written by the teachers. Extensive assessment narratives are co-constructed by the student and teachers at the middle and end of the year. In addition to mandated state exams, students complete and present extensive projects of their choice as well as a portfolio designed to assess growth in the major disciplines. The involvement of students in the assessment process as well as the focus on self-selected projects is also consistent with the power as caring relations model.

The school is wireless, and the seventh and eighth grades share a mobile laptop lab of approximately 15 wireless MacBook computers as well as a computer lab consisting of older-model Windows-based desktop computers. Students attend computer class once a week, and teachers share the laptop lab. In order to print from the laptops, students must save to a flash drive, switch to the desktop computer on the teacher’s desk, then print to a central printer housed in the main office of the junior high school.

The teacher and the classroom. At the time of the study, Sophia had been teaching for 3 years and was working on her master’s degree and state certification in literacy. She held an undergraduate degree and state certification in adolescent English education. Field notes, video and interview transcripts show that Sophia included whole class discussion, literature
circles, partner work, presentations, modelled writing and writer’s workshop in her daily teaching. Sophia said she consciously constructs an environment where students are able to develop as writers and readers. To that end, she purchased book sets for literature circles and created a classroom library of young adult literature using her own funds. Students frequently borrowed from that library throughout the school year. She encouraged students to submit their writing to competitions and participate in local poetry readings, and she used the school’s laptop technology to support the development of research skills and for the publication of student writing. Sophia built strong relationships with many of her students as evidenced by the number of current and former students who would stop by her room during our interview sessions. Her classroom and curriculum design appeared consistent with the power as caring relations model in that she supported student efforts to achieve, demonstrate respect, show responsibility and exercise self-determination.

There were, however, students who were unsuccessful in this seemingly model environment. Sophia often commented that the only way to fail was not to try; however, a handful of students were failing. This was puzzling because field notes showed that students were mostly engaged in the classroom activities. Hannah and Grant were two of those students.

The students. This article focuses on two students out of the 20 students in the class. Grant and Hannah were selected as focal students because of all their classmates they had the least access to computer technology outside of school. Neither student was identified as having learning disabilities, health impairments or received special services through an individualised education plan (IEP). Both students had regular attendance records and minimal disciplinary problems. As such, I believed looking closely at the experience of these two students would provide me with insights into how their prior knowledge of digital technology supported or hindered their classroom experiences.

Grant moved to CSD from Florida where he was considered an honours student, who is someone recognised as consistently having high grades and as having the potential to take advanced classes. In the United States, honours students are often granted additional privileges by teachers and the administration. However, Sophia did not know that Grant had been seen in this light until the end of the school year when he told her. Grant’s previous status as an honours student is consistent with field notes which show repeated references to insightful comments he made about the literature being studied. However, field notes also include reference to the almost continual reprimands he received from Sophia concerning his tendency to talk out of turn or socialise with friends during class. Field notes and video transcripts also show how Grant’s school performance was uneven. On some days he would write lengthy essays or poems and would spend time seeking just the right word for what he wanted to say. In class discussions about literature, he would be able to identify themes and character motivations that other students missed. On other days he would not write anything and would spend class time talking with his friends. Grant’s family also appeared to be highly social and he told me that he was not able to use his home computer often because it was shared with family members as well as his mother’s friends who come over to use the Internet. He had an email account and Myspace account and when able, he would use the computer to go to websites, play games and watch videos. He did not read or write for pleasure. At the end of the year, Grant failed eighth grade and left Community Magnet for one of the large comprehensive high schools in the district.

Hannah was a 14-year-old white female who had always lived in the CSD, but who had moved frequently. During the year the data were collected, Hannah and her mother lived in a women’s shelter for a period of time. She rarely spoke and seldom interacted with
her classmates; video recordings show her sitting almost motionless during class activities. Field notes also indicated that Hannah never contributed to classroom discussion and only spoke when directly asked a question. Hannah was one of only two students in the class who did not have a computer, and the only student who did not have an email account. She said she did have a Myspace page that she set up using the computers at the public library, but this statement is inconsistent with her claim that she did not have email (Myspace requires a valid email address). She said she did not play games on-line nor did she view videos on-line. Although Hannah struggled with participation in public forums, Sophia said she did well enough on her individual work to move on to Community Magnet’s ninth grade.

Data analysis

Initial analysis was conducted using methods consistent with grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Videos were viewed, logged and transcribed, and data were open coded and categories were developed and refined. When the issue of deletion of participation appeared as a recurring theme, I reread and recoded the data in order to check for sufficient evidence over time and across sources as well as for disconfirming evidence and discrepant cases (Erickson, 1986). The check confirmed that the deletion of participation appeared elsewhere during the school year. I chose the PowerPoint literacy event as representative of the complex interactions that contribute to the deletion of participation. The video of the entire literacy event was transcribed and the four sub-events described in this article were selected as key moments contributing to the deletion of participation.

Discourse analysis, as described by Bloome et al. (2005), was used to theorise the relations of power and models of power within each focal event. Specifically, the excerpts were examined for insights into ‘Who is doing what, to whom, where, and how through the use of language in classrooms?’ (Bloome et al., 2005, p. 49). Furthermore, Bloome and colleagues argue that the boundaries of the event should be problematised by asking what is happening, and what is the relationship of the event to other events. Therefore, I sought to understand what occurred during the 80 minutes of the class as a series of sub-events bounded by marked shifts in how the participants were positioned. I also considered each sub-event in relation to the other sub-events as well as the histories of the students.

In transcription, I follow conventions set forth by Bloome et al. (2005). Specifically, nonverbal actions are indicated by parentheses, shouting or raised voices by upper case letters, elongated words by colons (Yeːːah), rising intonation by an up arrow (↑), rapidly spoken utterances are placed between angled brackets (<quick<), utterances that overlap or follow quickly upon each other are indicated with the equals sign (=) and areas of transcriptionist doubt by XXX. Short, untimed pauses are indicated by (.) and utterances are divided into breath units. Physical acts (such as interactions with the laptop) that co-occur with speech are on the same line as the utterance. Physical acts that precede or follow speech are on separate lines.

Findings

In this section, I examine the progression of events that occurred as Hannah and Grant moved through the classroom assignment. I examine how Hannah and Grant participated...
in the assignment and consider how enactments and shifts in power contributed to the literal and symbolic deletion of participation. I consider each event through the different lenses of the models of power in order to consider alternative ways of understanding the events and final outcome. I begin with a brief description of the assignment then move through each sub-event within the larger event.

As part of an expeditionary learning project on community development, the students were required to design a flag for an imagined utopian community. To support the project, Sophia had dyads use the laptops to research the symbolism of the flag of a self-selected country. The students were given a worksheet on which to gather the information and compose a paragraph about the country and the flag. Once the worksheet was completed, the students were to create a PowerPoint presentation to share with the class. The objective of the lesson was to teach students how a community’s ideals are reflected in the flag design as well as to assess student knowledge of how to conduct an Internet search. Collaboration skills were not an expressed goal of the assignment although all Community Magnet teachers explicitly taught social and collaboration skills in the extended classes. However, no references to the lessons in social skills or collaboration appeared in any of the data collected, so it is unclear whether Sophia intentionally carried those lessons into English/language arts instruction. Sophia also assumed students knew how to use PowerPoint from their computer class and thus did not provide any direct instruction on the use of the technology. The students had approximately 60 minutes to complete their work. They were to save their work on a flash drive.

Data show that the deletion of participation developed over the course of the entire class. In this analysis, I focus on the four sub-events that illustrate the process of deletion. Within each sub-event, I discuss how the theoretical lens of relations of power and the models of power provide insight into the process of the deletion of participation.

Sub-event 1: setting the stage for the deletion of participation

After Sophia introduced the assignment, Grant retrieved the laptop and deposited it on his desk, which abutted Hannah’s. He then began walking around the room collecting football bets. As Grant moved around the room, Hannah positioned the laptop between the two desks, opened it and began typing and scrolling. After a few minutes, Grant returned to the desks and stood behind Hannah. The following excerpt captures the interaction between Grant and Hannah and demonstrates how they attempted to negotiate power.

Excerpt #1

1 Grant: (standing behind Hannah and looking at the computer which is balanced between the two desks) Who did dat?
2 Hannah: XXX
3 Grant: When ↑
4 Hannah: XXX
5 Grant: I don’t know what you talking about
6 Grant: You’re not giving no details
7 Grant: (Looks up and directs his gaze off camera) Where my dollar at ↑
8 Grant: Yeɛɛɛ:ah. (takes dollar from off camera hand)
9 Grant: My dollar (laughs)
Sophia: (off camera) Guys (.) I don’t really care about your Super Bowl bets
Grant: (gets up and walks off camera) Victory is soo sweet
Hannah: (pulls the laptop onto her desk, scrolls and taps touch pad)
(49 seconds)
Grant: (re-enters camera range and stands behind Hannah)
Grant: (turns left hand upward, points with index finger)
Grant: (raises both hands upward and drops hands rapidly) hhh.
Hannah: Yo ↑ u do it (waves her left hand)
Grant: (sits at his desk, picks up a pencil and begins copying information from the
screen onto the worksheet.)

During this exchange, Grant moved between talking to his friends and starting the
assignment. Hannah appeared to focus on the assignment and did not respond to the
classroom talk. Although Grant’s public performance was one of disengagement (lines
7–12), he made an attempt to engage in the assignment by taking the supervisory position
of standing above and behind Hannah (lines 1–6 and lines 15–17) as well as by his verbal
comments (lines 1–6) and body language (lines 15–17). Sophia did not attend to the
friction between Grant and Hannah as she was more focused on managing the whole class
(lines 10–11). Initially, Hannah indicated shared ownership of the laptop by placing it on
both desks, but claimed ownership after Grant criticised her work. Hannah responded to
Grant’s criticism by offering to relinquish control (line 18), but demonstrated anger by
waving her hand and with the rising inflection on the word ‘you’ (line 18). Grant did not
take up Hannah’s offer, nor is it clear that Hannah’s offer was sincere.

I suggest that the lenses of power as product and power as process can be used to
understand what is occurring within the student-to-student relationship. Using the power
as product model, we can name the laptop as a reification of institutional power. In other
words, the laptop, as a literacy artefact, folds in (Brandt & Clinton, 2002) the institutional
definition of what constitutes research and what it means to be engaged. As such,
I suggest that the person with the laptop becomes the representative of the institution and
thus is the person in control of the assignment.

However, when analysed through the power as process lens, a more complex picture of
the event and the students’ positions towards each other and the assignment emerges.
First, although Grant initially established ownership of the laptop by retrieving it and
placing it on his desk, he abdicated ownership when he turned his attention elsewhere.
This opens up an opportunity for power to circulate or be renegotiated. When Hannah
took the laptop she also took physical and symbolic ownership of the assignment; however,
Grant attempted to regain control by commenting on Hannah’s work. That is,
Grant’s verbal comments (lines 5–6) sent the message that Hannah did not appear to be
meeting the criteria for the project as understood by Grant. At this point, he and Hannah
were potentially negotiating what counts as a meaningful effort towards completing the
assignment. Grant then left the area once again, this time for 49 seconds. When he
returned, he once again took up a supervisory position (line 15). Although he did not
critique Hannah verbally this time, his raising and dropping of his hands combined with
the heavy sigh (lines 16 and 17) let Hannah know that her actions did not meet with his
approval.

An initial and surface analysis using the power as product model suggests that Grant
may have been carrying an internalised sense of what the end product should be and is
dissatisfied with Hannah’s work. However, because I was unable to interview Grant about this interaction, such an analysis is conjecture. A more apt analysis may be arrived at by using the power as process model combined with the knowledge that Grant wrested the laptop away from Hannah later in the work period. This suggests that his actions were part of the process of negotiating power, and in fact when he stood over her, he physically enacted the surveillance that is inherent within the Foucauldian product as process model.

Negotiation, however, is a two-way process, and thus far I have only discussed Grant’s actions. Hannah appeared not to negotiate. She responded to Grant’s critique with ‘Yo u do it’ (line 18), which indicated a willingness to relinquish control of the laptop and control of the project. However, immediately following her offer, Grant sat down without Hannah giving up the laptop. Instead, Grant picked up a pencil and paper and began copying down what Hannah found on-line. The result of this exchange is that the students negotiated roles and power remained in circulation between Hannah and Grant. Despite the apparent circulation of power, it is important to remember that the negotiation of power existed within a framework where success was ultimately measured by the students’ ability to create a presentation that met the requirements of the teacher. The PowerPoint presentation thus is a reification or artefact of student participation.

Thus far, the students appeared to be successful in their participation in the assignment. Grant’s early engagement in collecting his bets had the potential of deleting his participation, but he was able to negotiate his way back into the assignment by critiquing Hannah’s performance, thus making clear that his presence was needed in order to meet the requirements of the task. Hannah also potentially deleted her role by offering to give up her involvement (line 18), but salvaged her role by retaining control of the laptop. However, consideration of the actions of the students within the context of past behaviours as well as the known outcome of the activity reveal that it is within this exchange that the deletion of participation germinates. Grant’s gregariousness and off-task behaviour in this task was consistent with what he exhibited throughout the school year. Sophia repeatedly expressed frustration with Grant and as a result often ignored his comments regardless of the value of what he was saying. Thus, Sophia may have been positioned by past events to miss Grant’s efforts. The risk of deleting Hannah’s participation is less evident in this exchange; she still appeared to be actively engaged in the task. However, given the retrospective knowledge that Grant later gained access to the laptop suggests that the conflict and negotiation of power that occurs in this first event was unresolved. It is the conflict between Hannah and Grant that set Hannah’s deletion of participation in motion.

Sub-event 2: teacher and student relationships and the deletion of participation

As class progressed, Hannah kept the laptop on her desk and scrolled as Grant took notes. After a few minutes, Grant reached over and tapped the touch pad with his pen. Hannah responded by turning the laptop towards Grant’s desk, sitting back, resting her head on her hand and staring at the screen. After a few moments, Grant turned to Hannah and asked, ‘Ok. What else’, but Hannah did not respond. Grant continued his notetaking and Hannah tapped the touch pad. After a few minutes of notetaking in this manner, Grant sighed audibly then accused Hannah of not doing any of the work. He threw up his hands, stood and walked away. He returned with Sophia. The following excerpt shows how Sophia intervened.
Excerpt #2

1 Sophia: Ok
2 Sophia: what your group needs to do
3 work together (.)
4 (is) you need to have one person (on) the computer
5 and one person
6 who is writing the information down
7 Grant: I’ll write it down
8 Sophia: The person
9 Grant: but she’s gonna present it. =
10 Hannah: = I’m not presenting it. (shakes head)
11 Sophia: >LISTEN TO ME<
12 The person who’s (on) the computer will
13 (tell the person) writing stuff down
14 (what) to write
15 Ok (.) Cause you cannot work together
16 if one person is looking at it and writing
17 So (.) Hannah (.) you’re going to write it down
18 (and Grant)
19 you will tell Hannah (moves the laptop to Grant’s desk and walks away.)
20 Hannah: (sits back in her chair)
21 Grant: hhh. (leans head on left hand and taps touch pad)
22 Hannah: XXX
23 Grant: (covers his face then takes the computer)
24 I tell you what (takes the paper)
25 Hannah: (pulls something out of her bag)
26 Grant: (taps pencil)
27 Grant: Ok (begins writing) is right
28 Hannah: (glances at Grant)
29 Grant: I got this (.) By (.)
30 (looks at the assignment instructions)
31 Where is it located ↑ (begins tapping the touch pad and scrolling)

From the perspective of power as product it appears that Sophia held the power when she directed the students (lines 1–6 and 11–19) and particularly when she stopped the students from attempting to renegotiate roles by raising her voice (line 11) and assigned them specific roles (lines 17–19). Sophia further articulated her position of power by placing the laptop onto Grant’s desk (line 19). During this exchange, power did not circulate, but the power as process model allows us to see that Hannah and Grant attempted to gain some control over the assigned roles (lines 7–10). If negotiation had occurred at that moment, Sophia and the students might have moved closer to the school’s stated mission of self-determination and shared decision-making, but Sophia’s strong expression of how collaboration was to occur (lines 11 and 17–19) was consistent with how she managed the class throughout the school year. Data do not show alternative or student-developed approaches to collaboration. However, a more complex view of this sub-event can be developed if we follow Bloome et al.’s. (2005) recommendation to consider what comes before and after a particular event. In this instance, I suggest that what occurred in excerpt
#2 is part of a larger negotiation of power which is apparent when analysed through the lens of power as process. As shown in excerpt #1, Hannah held control of the laptop despite Grant’s apparent dissatisfaction with her work. Grant worked under these conditions for a period of time, but eventually recruited Sophia. The data do not reveal Grant’s motivation for his actions, but his body language, which includes sighing and the throwing up of his hands, indicated a level of frustration. Recruiting Sophia also could have served as a performance tool; Grant may have been demonstrating that he was attempting to do that work and complete the assignment. Again, the data do not provide evidence of such a motive and thus such an analysis remains conjecture. Regardless of the reasons for his actions, the end result is a shift of power as enacted in the student/student relationship. Specifically, by turning to Sophia as the authority, Grant shifted control of the laptop from Hannah to him (line 19) thus shifting control of the assignment. This shift contributed to the deletion of Hannah’s participation.

Hannah could have continued to participate if she had followed Sophia’s direction to do the writing; however, Hannah contributed to the deletion of her participation when she did not accept Sophia’s assigned roles. She sat back (line 20) and turned her attention elsewhere (line 25). Grant then took control of both tasks (lines 24, 29 and 30) and Hannah became a bystander. As field notes and interviews with Sophia indicate, this bystander position was consistent with the behaviour Hannah exhibited throughout the school year. Hannah would work independently, but whenever asked to participate in a group setting, Hannah would become passive.

In the first two events described, both students participated in the class assignment; however, the events combined with the histories of the students set the deletion of participation in motion. Hannah’s participation was potentially deleted through her passive response to Grant’s bid to gain control of the laptop and thus the assignment, and Grant’s participation was potentially deleted by his established identity as an unfocused student and Sophia’s tendency to overlook his contributions. At this point, however, their participation in the event still had the potential to be successful. It is the failure of technology that contributed the final piece to the deletion of their participation.

Sub-events 3 and 4: technology and the deletion of participation

Following Sophia’s intervention and the placement of the laptop onto his desk, Grant quietly copied information onto the worksheet distributed at the beginning of class. Hannah sat next to Grant chewing gum and staring at the centre of the room. At times she would move her notebook or backpack, but she never spoke, touched the laptop or wrote anything. Hannah had effectively deleted her participation, but the situation was not over. Both Sophia and Grant made an effort to draw Hannah back into the activity, but then undermined those efforts through subsequent actions.

Excerpt #3

1 Grant: I’m done (moves the laptop toward Hannah)
2 We’re done
3 Info (writes at the top of the paper)
4 Sophia: You have your presentation put together?
5 (Grant continues writing)
6 Grant: a lot of information
Sophia: (looking at Hannah) I’m strongly urging you to make a PowerPoint
Grant: (looks up at Sophia) right now
Sophia: (nods and walks away)
Hannah: (takes the laptop.)
Grant: (taps his pen on the desk and looks off camera.)
Grant: Just log into the PowerPoint and then I’ll do the PowerPoint. (taps pen)
Hannah: (lifts her hand from the laptop.)
Hannah: (pushes the computer onto Grant’s desk.)

Shortly after Hannah returned the laptop to Grant, he asked a friend for help in opening PowerPoint. When his friend was unable to help him, Sophia led him through the steps. Sophia did not comment on the fact that she had given Hannah the laptop only moments earlier.

In this exchange, Grant opened up the possibility of Hannah’s inclusion when he changed his utterance from ‘I’m done’ (line 1) to ‘We’re done’ (line 2) and by moving the laptop onto Hannah’s desk. However, before Hannah could respond to Grant’s opening, Sophia asked whether they had completed the presentation (line 4), which served to orient the students towards the next step in the assignment. A power as product view of Sophia’s interruption indicates that the teacher controlled what counts as the successful completion of the task and how the task should be carried out. At this point, power was again in Sophia’s hands and Grant reacted by letting Sophia know that he had done his part of the job (line 6). However, Sophia did not respond to Grant and instead directly instructed Hannah to create the PowerPoint (line 7). Sophia’s move served to re-establish Hannah’s participation in the assignment, but did so by putting the emphasis on the creation of the PowerPoint presentation. Although Sophia did not explicitly state that passing the assignment was dependent on the successful completion of the task, her past grading practices, her history with the students and her direct gaze at Hannah combined with the words ‘strongly urged’ made expectations clear. Furthermore, in her focus on orienting the students towards the next stage of the assignment, she did not explicitly acknowledge Grant’s contribution to the project. If, as stated by Sophia, students would pass if they did the work, such acknowledgement would have established Grant as moving towards a passing grade on the project. However, by not noting Grant’s participation, she may have been contributing to the possibility of deleting his participation. This lack of noticing or acknowledgement is similar to what Schegloff (1986) identified as occurring within sequential deletion.

Once again, however, viewing this through the lens of power of product is insufficient. If we consider this interaction through the perspective of power as process, we can see that even though Sophia left Hannah in control of the laptop (line 10), this symbolic power was meaningless, because Hannah’s participation was immediately undermined by Grant’s instruction to ‘Just log into the PowerPoint and then I’ll do the PowerPoint’ (line 12). Grant appeared to be inviting Hannah into the activity, yet after Hannah handed the computer back to Grant, he was forced to first ask a friend and then Sophia for help logging in. His apparent attempt to include Hannah, therefore, may have been self-serving rather than a sincere effort at collaboration. Hannah also contributed to the deletion of her participation once again when she lifted her hand from the laptop and pushed it onto Grant’s desk (lines 13–14). At this juncture, the interaction between her and Grant served to delete her participation. When considered within the view of the entire literacy event, Hannah’s ability to participate was brought about through constant
negotiation, and each negotiation with Grant appears to sequentially build towards deleting her participation.

In all three events thus far described, Grant appeared to be fully participating in the activity. I suggest, however, that Sophia’s focus on the next step without first acknowledging what Grant had accomplished served as a piece in the sequential deletion of his participation. As noted earlier, Sophia had developed a habit of ignoring Grant’s contributions to the class because of his highly gregarious nature. The fact that Grant lacked the technological knowledge to open up PowerPoint was a second element in the sequential deletion of his participation. None of these are by themselves enough to erase what Grant had done thus far, but served to raise the risk that his efforts would go unrecognised. Thus, within the realm of shifting power relations within a model of power as process, Grant contributed to deleting Hannah’s participation, an effect which is compounded by her actions. Within the realm of power as product, Sophia contributed to deleting Grant’s participation by focusing on the desired end product and not recognising his efforts.

Grant maintained control of the laptop and the assignment through the majority of the class period, but his control ended at the end of class when the students were told to save their document to a flash drive. Hannah took on the task because Grant did not have a flash drive. At that moment, the laptop ceased to be a symbol of power, and the flash drive took on the role. This represents a final shift in power relations. The literal deletion of participation occurred at this point because Hannah saved the document incorrectly and lost the work.

During the next class meeting, Sophia told Grant and Hannah to redo their work but Grant refused because he said he already did it. Hannah also refused because she did not want to do the work alone. In the end, neither Grant nor Hannah completed the assignment. Whether Hannah intentionally lost the data is unknown because I was unable to interview her about this event, and even if I were able to do so, she may not have admitted to intentionality. Regardless of intent, the loss of the data finalised the deletion of participation for both Hannah and Grant and was further solidified by the students’ refusal to redo the work. In this final instance, applying the power as product model provides insight into why the students failed the assignment even though they did participate; no tangible product was produced which would have been a reification of their participation.

Discussion

The data show that deletion of participation is constructed over time through interactions between students, between students and teacher, and is compounded by students’ unfamiliarity with technology despite the school’s expressed focus on community and process, as evidenced by the school mission and curricular design. Both the power as product and power as process models are necessary for understanding how Hannah’s and Grant’s participation was deleted during the course of the class.

Power as product

Sophia’s emphasis on the completion of the product and the fact that she did not explicitly acknowledge Grant’s work on the project is best understood through the power
as product model. The artefacts that the students and Sophia used to support the assignment are reifications of the power relations that exist within traditional schooling and persist even when the ostensible design of the school is one of process and caring. Wenger (1998) defines reification as ‘the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into “thingness”. In so doing, we create points of focus around which the negotiation of meaning becomes organized’ (p. 58). For instance, the worksheet that had to be used to collect data, the paragraph that had to be written and the PowerPoint presentation that had to be created all were products that Sophia used not only to guide engagement in the assignment but also as a form of surveillance. Sophia was ‘folded in’ (Brandt & Clinton, 2002) to the products in that they served to extend her relationship to the students even when she was not physically interacting with them.

The power as product model also provides insight into an apparent hierarchy among these texts in that despite Grant’s completion of the worksheet and paragraph, success in the project was marked by the completion of the PowerPoint presentation. In other words, all three products had to be completed before they could be exchanged for a passing grade. Successful completion of the task would then be used along with other assigned tasks to pass the marking period, the year and eventually build towards additional opportunities for credentialling through a high school diploma. Each text used and each literacy event participated in, therefore, reifies the power held by the teacher who in turn represents the district and the state credentialling mechanism.

As Bloome et al. (2005) point out, however, the power as product model is insufficient for gaining a complex understanding of how Hannah’s and Grant’s participation was deleted. The next section discusses how the power as process model provides additional insight into the event.

Power as process
Applying the power as process lens to Hannah’s and Grant’s interactions reveals how power circulates between the two students. The process begins when Hannah takes control of the laptop at the beginning of the class, continues as Grant criticises her and ends when Grant recruits Sophia to redistribute the symbol of power – the laptop. Hannah and Grant attempt to draw Sophia into the negotiation process in excerpt #2 when they suggest roles, but Sophia ignores their attempt and instead assigns them roles, which they in turn ignore. Sophia also ignores her own dictate when she assists Grant in opening up PowerPoint. These decisions result in deleting Hannah’s participation. Grant’s participation is then literally deleted through the loss of data when Hannah is given responsibility for saving to the flash drive and symbolically deleted when Sophia does not give him credit for the work he did. Grant responds to the deletion of his participation by refusing to redo the work, as does Hannah.

The process described above is concerned with access to the technology that is used to create the end product, which serves as the reification of the students’ participation as well as the teacher’s surveillance. The person in control of the technology controls the creation of the artefact and the artefact is used to confirm participation. Thus, the person who controls the artefact is in the dominant position. However, ultimately the negotiations of the students are discounted in that Sophia holds the power to determine whether their participation counted or not.
Conclusions and implications

What I have described is most likely familiar to anyone who has spent time in a classroom. Some students are more engaged in an activity than others, some complete assignments and some do not, personality conflicts occur and some students ultimately experience success as defined by completing a project or passing the course and others do not. Although the issues of what constitutes success and whether an activity such as the one described in this article is an authentic learning experience are important ones, such a discussion is beyond the scope of this article. My proposition is that concepts of success and failure are tied up in the construction of participation within learning environments, which are integral to how power circulates among students and between the students and the teacher.

As Bloome et al. (2005) have pointed out, all research is partial. I have only alluded to how race, gender and socioeconomic factors contribute to Grant’s and Hannah’s classroom experience. Data are insufficient to understand how Hannah’s ability to participate was affected by multiple moves, time spent in a women’s shelter and limited access to a computer. Likewise, additional data are necessary to understand how Grant’s participation was impacted by his move across the country, the change from being an honours student in Florida to being just another student in his new school and the fact that he had to share his computer with multiple friends and family members which limited the time he could spend learning how to use it. At a simplistic level, it could be argued that if either student had had extensive experience with using computers, Grant would have been able to open and use PowerPoint without asking for help, and Hannah would have been able to save the PowerPoint presentation to her flash drive without any problems. Such a straightforward circumstance might have prevented the work from being lost. However, none of these issues can be adequately addressed without deeper understandings of each of their lives, and this study, which was classroom based, did not provide such insight.

What this research does do is raise additional questions for classroom practice. It is important to recognise that despite the attempts of the school and teacher to build a constructivist, inquiry-based learning environment, there are still times when classroom activities are highly pedagogised. Would the outcome of this experience have been different if Sophia had constructed the assignment differently? Did the fact that the task could be completed independently add to the likelihood that a less assertive student like Hannah would be relegated to the sidelines? Did existing patterns of interactions affect how the teacher understood the nature of student participation? The deletion of participation also raises issues within assessment. Although Sophia said one of her teaching objectives was to get a sense of student knowledge of Internet searches, her assessment was based on the presence or absence of the product rather than on their use of the Internet and attempts to gather the data and complete the assignment.

What is poignant about this event is that it contributed to Grant’s failure to pass eighth grade, which may have long-term implications for graduation. Naturally, his lack of success in eighth grade can be attributed to more than the event described here, but this event is part of a pattern observed throughout the year. It is also troubling that Hannah passed but only through her individual efforts. She did not develop her abilities to cooperate and collaborate with her classmates – skills that have been identified as necessary in the 21st century (National Council of Teachers of English, 2009). Given the risks faced by students such as Grant and Hannah, I argue that we need to pay closer attention to how power circulates and constructs participation.
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References


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