

“I Don’t Know If That’d Be English or Not”: Third Space Theory and Literacy Instruction

Third space theory can be used within literacy classrooms as a means of better understanding student learning resistance and devising ways to overcome it.

Sheila Benson

“If an English class...made a movie, that’d be fun. That’d be a lot more fun ‘cuz it’d be a lot more like hands-on, or like made a story—or...instead of writing it they’d made it into a movie.” (Bud, personal interview, September 30, 2004)

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha (1994) elaborated on what he named as third space theory: the creation by formerly colonized people of an identity space that resists limitations imposed by racist, classist, and other oppressive forces in their lives. He referred to third space as an area “for elaborating strategies of selfhood...that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (pp. 1–2). Instead of limiting thinking to boundaries set by outside institutions, oppressed people create a new space within official space that functions under rules more beneficial to them.

Moje et al. (2004), in their study of content area learning within a secondary science classroom, extended Bhabha’s concept of third space into classrooms, arguing that third space should be introduced “in ways that challenge, destabilize, and, ultimately, expand the literacy practices that are typically valued in school and in the everyday world” (p. 44). Where Bhabha (1994) envisioned third space as an area of political resistance, Moje et al. proposed ways that third space can invite greater student engagement through an acknowledgment of their everyday knowledge’s relevance to content area learning.

Building from Moje et al.’s (2004) argument, this article uses third space theory as a lens to examine vignettes of how one 11th-grade student, who will be referred to with the pseudonym of Bud throughout this article, attempted to introduce his everyday knowledge into the contested space of his language arts classroom in ways that better allowed him to participate in literacy learning. These vignettes serve as reflection points in considering how to create literacy learning conditions that build on the multimodal literacies students bring to the classroom (e.g., Kress, 2003; Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Snyder, 2002) rather than position them as nonexperts.

In taking this approach, I do not intend to position this student as a representative of all students or even as parallel to the colonized peoples in

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Bhabha's (1994) work. As a white male from a lower middle class socioeconomic status, Bud is in a relatively privileged position. It could be argued that his experiences are far removed from the political and economic struggles faced by colonized peoples and that therefore third space theory does not apply to his situation.

I would argue, however, that although third space theory has been a useful means of critiquing weighty political imbalances, its usefulness extends beyond the traditional political sphere. Schools are highly politicized spaces—al-

beit differently politicized than governments of former colonies—and present their own scenarios of colonization and resistance to that colonization. As Moje et al. (2004) have demonstrated, and as will be seen in the research surveyed in the next section, third space theory can be a useful lens for examining how access to intellectual and even physical resources is determined and how that access can be reconfigured to be more inclusive of all students' needs. I use third space theory in this light, offering Bud's experiences as material for further reflection on the larger issue of creating more inclusive learning spaces for teachers and students in language arts classrooms.

Laying Theoretical Groundwork

Orientation to Third Space

Bhabha (1994) argued that there are two cultural spaces: one created by the majority group and imposed on minority groups and one that minority groups see as their actual culture. Minority groups reclaim their identity by creating a third space: a space within the already-determined first space that speaks back to first space stereotypes.

A key component of this third space is its ability to be part of both other spaces while maintaining a separate space for critique. As Bhabha (1994) explained, "The transformational value of [third space] lies in the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are *neither the One...nor the Other...but something*

else besides, which contests the terms and territories of both" (p. 28). Because third space is part of both other spaces and yet new, it allows the creator of the third space to detach temporarily from already-existing parameters and examine them with newer eyes. An individual can never detach completely from the systems within which the individual already exists, but third space allows important breathing room.

Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of rhizomatic cartography provides an important lens for understanding third space theory. Following a botanical metaphor, rhizomes grow from multiple points in multiple directions simultaneously. Rather than a tree, with a central knowledge concept from which other knowledge branches off, rhizomes produce knowledge at multiple points and can jump to new points at any time. As Hagood (2004) explained, "By definition, rhizomes constantly shift and change, growing simultaneously in all directions" (p. 145). This rhizome metaphor maps nicely with third space theory, emphasizing that there are multiple points of power in any given interaction rather than a single power entity that controls how, for example, classroom learning should be happening. A teacher is not the sole conveyer or producer of knowledge. Students have control of the learning process as well.

Changing Physical Spaces

Wilson (2000, 2004) has applied Bhabha's (1994) framework to her work with prisoners and their literacy practices, focusing on how prisoners use third space to preserve their nonprison identities in an intensely limiting atmosphere. Among other things, prisoners reconfigure official requisition forms for their own nonprison purposes, alter prison clothing to better comply with nonprison fashion conventions, and mark the passage of time in ways that reject the prison-imposed schedule.

The creation of a third space, outside of official sanctions and yet functioning within them, happens regularly within schools. In her work within an urban elementary school, Ferguson (2000) described a punishing room where children are separated from their peers after misbehavior. Although students saw being in this room as punishment, they also transformed it into a space that fulfilled social purposes. Within this

space, students could interact with students who were older. They were able to escape regular classroom routines and enhance their social status. As Ferguson (2000) explained, "This is a place where children create another space for themselves in school that is sociable.... It is a space where failure and success, wins and losses are fashioned out of the same events that spell trouble for the adults" (p. 44).

Willis (1977) recounted a similar coopting of space in his research, in which a group of boys labeled as troublemakers found ways to use school spaces to avoid completing school-assigned work. Willis described how the boys used hall passes to leave the classroom and avoid assignments they did not wish to complete. Trips to pencil sharpeners or garbage cans served a similar purpose, allowing the boys to appear productive without completing expected work. The teacher had control of the classroom schedule, but the boys created a space in which they could leave their seats, and even the room, at will.

Changing Ideological Spaces

Leander (2007) demonstrated a similar co-opting of official classroom space by students, although in this case, the space was virtual rather than physical. Leander's research took place in a wireless school where every student was required to bring a laptop to classes. To protect students from potential predatory situations in cyberspace and prevent online distractions, teachers set up a strict procedure for classroom-based research and expected students to follow it. Leander documented how students circumvented research procedures set up within official classroom space, using classroom time to accomplish the assigned task and several other personal tasks (e.g., instant messaging, online shopping) simultaneously. The research task was completed, but it was completed on students' terms within an electronic space that teachers did not understand or trust and therefore attempted to regulate.

Methodology

The data for this article come from a larger ethnographic study focused on understanding classroom manifestations of multiliteracies theory (The New London Group, 2000). I spent the 2004–2005

academic year studying teacher, student, and administrator interactions within a secondary language arts course intended by course creators to serve as a place to explore reconfigurations of literacy and use non-print literacy practices as a bridge to print literacy success for all students. At the same time, administrators viewed the course as a place for students who needed remedial reading help based on low standardized test scores. Students, meanwhile—particularly Bud—struggled to fit the course and its multimodal practices into their concept of what should happen within a language arts classroom space.

Bud was one of seven focal students I worked with during the larger study. A tall, gangly, 16-year-old Caucasian, he not only took up a lot of physical space in the room but also increased that sense of taking up space by speaking loudly in class discussion. Bud liked to play the "big, funny guy" role in class, cracking jokes whenever he saw an opportunity. He had taken Language Arts 10 from this same teacher and enrolled in this course because "everybody took Humanities, so I figured the class would be different" (Bud, personal interview, September 30, 2004).

Bud also attracted my attention because of his elaborate efforts to avoid reading and writing, one of which appears as an illustrative vignette later in this article. Whenever students were assigned in-class reading, he would use his book as a screen for whispered conversations with a friend or take a quick catnap while supposedly reading. He rarely brought more than a pencil to class and was constantly being reprimanded for not bringing a notebook or his assigned homework.

When asked to describe his ideal English class, Bud described a class in which students watch movie adaptations of books, use writing for unstructured, reflective thinking, and participate in lots of hands-on activities and discussion. In his words, "We would watch a movie of a book, [because] I don't like to read at all.... I don't like to write about the book, but...I like to write about...common stuff...that you know about" (personal interview, September 30, 2004). He enjoyed the discussion elements of this current course and wished discussions happened more often. At the same time, he wondered about the role of discussion in a language arts course: "I like to talk about...topics

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and stuff and...debate [them]. But I don't know if that'd be English or not. I don't know if that'd be considered an English class" (personal interview, September 30, 2004).

He complained early on that in a class he anticipated to be different from his previous language arts classes, he was writing "more than...last year" and "it's...a lot harder" (personal interview, September 30, 2004). In his words, "We don't...work a *lot* on one big

thing, we just work on *tons* of stuff, which kind of annoys me about this class" (personal interview, September 30, 2004). Bud enjoyed class activities involving drawing or analyzing music or photographs; he just didn't want to read and write.

I conducted twice-weekly observations of Bud and his fellow students, taking detailed notes about classroom events and writing analytical memos about each classroom observation as I worked to tease out emerging themes based on classroom events. I also interviewed Bud periodically, both formally and informally, and asked him to compile a portfolio of course work that he felt best represented his learning in the course. I used that portfolio as a starting point for the second formal interview, which happened about midway through the school year. I had originally planned to conduct three structured interviews with Bud—near the beginning of the year, somewhere in the middle of the year, and near the end of the year—but his increasingly sporadic class attendance necessitated a departure from that schedule. All conversations with Bud were tape-recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

In reading across his interview data and classroom artifacts as well as my field notes and analytical memos, instances where Bud resisted classroom reading and writing continually rose to the surface. As I reread these instances of resistance, I noted the language he used to describe class activities he resisted (e.g., "busy work," "I can write, but I won't") as well as nonverbal resistance (e.g., refusing to bring materials to class, sleeping). I also noted that the work he did choose to complete was creative and carefully thought out, and the contrast between his ability to describe

his purposes in completing class assignments and his general disengagement was striking.

Bud's representation of his work in our interviews was different from how he represented himself to others in the class, which led me to think about his class performance in light of third space theory. I reread his data through a third space theory lens and created two coding categories: (1) Where is he being pushed into a space he dislikes? (2) Where is he co-opting classroom activities to create space for his own expertise to be recognized? Reexamining my data about Bud according to these two categories helped me see his behavior as a way for him to establish expertise in a setting where he had traditionally been positioned as a novice, because his knowledge set did not match the teacher's.

The four vignettes that follow, taken from observation notes at various points during the school year, illustrate Bud's efforts to create a third space in which he could hold expertise and counteract the school's identification of him solely in terms of skills he lacked. These vignettes, and the subsequent discussion of them, offer a more complicated representation of why some students resist the literacy learning that teachers seek to help them achieve.

Vignette 1: Transforming Physical Space in the Computer Lab

Today, students are in the computer lab completing a letter-writing assignment based on their recent reading of *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1982). Their task is to exchange letters with two other students about issues from the book, similar to the letters exchanged in the actual novel. Students have been to the computer lab once already this week, and today they are supposed to finish the final letter out of a series of at least three exchanges within their groups.

Class begins at 12:50 p.m. Students were told at the end of yesterday's class that they needed to report directly to the computer lab today. Bud arrives a few minutes late, explaining that he went to the regular classroom first, because he forgot that class would be held in the computer lab today. When he arrives, every other student is focused on the day's writing task. Bud sits at a computer and scans the room to catch the eye of one of his friends. They are all writing.

- 1:15 p.m. Bud is no longer in the computer lab. The teacher does not seem to notice his absence.
- 1:25 p.m. Bud returns. He wanders past his friends' computers and holds a whispered conversation, looking up periodically to monitor the teacher's location in the room. During the conversation, Bud stands so that he looks as if he is discussing what students have written on the computer screen, occasionally pointing at a sentence.
- 1:30 p.m. Bud returns to his computer and stares at the blank screen.
- 1:33 p.m. The teacher stands by Bud to help him start writing. Bud writes one sentence, signals to the teacher that he's able to continue independently, and types more rapidly. The teacher leaves to answer another student's question.
- 1:35 p.m. Bud completes one paragraph.
- 1:40 p.m. The bell rings to end class. Bud deletes his paragraph and leaves the computer lab. (field notes, January 20, 2005)

Vignette 2: Transforming Topics in the Comic Memoir

The comic memoir was introduced about one month into the school year, just as students were finishing reading their first whole-class novel. Students were to choose one of the six short narratives they had written and turn it into an eight-panel comic. Bud struggled with the assignment at first, because material needed to be classroom appropriate. He complained about this stricture, saying that "it was hard to like think of memories that you could say in class... 'cuz most of the funniest and cool stuff happens with stuff that you can't really talk about in your class" (personal interview, September 30, 2004).

His solution to this dilemma was to fill his comic with innuendo and inside jokes. That way, he could still write about a topic that was not strictly school appropriate without actually breaking any rules. Bud described an incident in which he and his friends ran from the police to avoid arrest for a series of undisclosed activities in a hotel room. In describing this

incident, he relied heavily on a narrator to control pacing and actual detail, with the narrator pointing out that inappropriate details were being omitted. This technique allowed Bud to reference forbidden events while still standing on subject-safe ground. He also included some visual references that only certain audience members would understand, including a football jersey number that indexed freeing a buddy from a football team lockdown and a Taco Bell logo that signaled a trip out of the hotel room to do something potentially illicit.

In describing his comic during an interview, Bud relished the innuendo he had included, describing his editorial choices and some of the inside jokes he'd referenced: "I put a ton of inside jokes in here. Well, like just like if you're one of the people that was here or somebody that knew me really well or somethin' like... this is the narrator again...here and he's saying...he had to omit some details 'cuz they're naughty" (March 14, 2005). Bud laughed after saying this, then described a few more inside jokes for the researcher. The comic allowed him to receive academic credit while taking the assignment in a transgressive direction.

Vignette 3: Transforming Discussion Space During a Small-Group Discussion

During this class period, students were divided into groups of three to four people and assigned a discussion topic connected with the novel being studied. Bud, who had not read the book, was assigned to a group with Benny, who had completed the reading. The other two group members may or may not have completed the reading; it was difficult to determine based on their participation levels. Bud asked Benny to summarize the book for him and appeared to be somewhat interested in the description Benny provided.

Interest grew, however, when Bud became bored with the required discussion topic and asked Benny about the Dan Brown book that was sitting at his feet. At this point, Benny checked to see if the teacher was within earshot and then began describing the plot. Bud leaned in and placed all four legs of his chair flat on the floor, a stance he took in class whenever discussion seemed to be interesting to him. With the other two group members occasionally chiming in with their opinions, Benny and Bud entered into an

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intense discussion about conspiracy theory, black holes, and antimatter. The discussion never returned to the assigned topic from the class-required novel (field notes, October 26, 2004).

Vignette 4: Transforming the Traditional Research Paper

The popular culture canon paper was introduced about a week after the winter semester break. The assignment was intended to satisfy a district requirement for a structured research paper while also allowing students freedom to

research a topic that they were genuinely interested in. The students' task was to choose a piece of popular culture that would still be important 10 years from now. The research paper would present an argument for why their topic mattered across time and society. Students would need to search out television, film, and music critics' reviews, biographical information, and a wide range of online materials to complete the project successfully.

When Bud realized he had free topic rein, he appeared to be excited. The teacher required students to complete a series of short essay questions about why they chose their topic and show it to him before they could begin research in the computer lab. Bud worked quickly on this first step, choosing the band Guns N' Roses. He received the teacher's approval and then moved to a computer to begin locating research sources. Unlike in the first vignette, when he spent the class period finding ways to appear productive while avoiding any actual writing, this time Bud stayed focused, examining potential research and printing off material that looked promising.

This interest was short-lived, however. As the assignment proceeded, Bud began to be absent more and more often. He was often present for only a small portion of the class period (20 minutes or so), regularly receiving notes from the office for him to leave. When he was in class, he shuffled with papers, put his head down on the table, or held whispered conversations with friends rather than working on his assignment.

As these avoidance tactics became more evident, I asked Bud what he thought of the project. He liked his topic, and he liked being able to write about a subject that was not typically allowed in school. What Bud didn't like was the requirement to write a paper. He felt that formal, school-defined writing hampered his creativity: "Allow as much creative ability as possible. Like if this was 'you *can* write a paper or you *can* write a comic or you *can* write a screenplay or you *can* make a soundtrack'...I'd be all over it.... Like I *can* write a paper but *won't*" (personal interview, March 14, 2005). He laughed as he said this, adding that what had started off looking like a fun assignment had turned into just one more school paper. What he wanted to do with the paper had been forced out. He wanted either no guidelines at all, allowing for maximum creativity, or a strict template to follow, so he could do the assignment exactly as the teacher had in mind. Since neither option was occurring, and he was being pushed into a space that did not match the freedom he felt the assignment should allow, his strategy was to stop working on the assignment.

Patterns Within the Vignettes

Bud's use of third space within this classroom setting, although far less oppressive in terms of his identity preservation, paralleled the prisoners' use of third space in Wilson's (2000, 2004) work. The prisoners altered objects and rules, so their preprison identities could be preserved; Bud altered required assignments so that he could demonstrate his artistic skill and creativity, which was not possible in traditional writing genres.

Within this class setting, multimodal assignments were potentially subversive, which appeared to be highly appealing to Bud. The assignments he completed, albeit few and far between, always had a multimodal component, which allowed him to create a small space of expertise within a class that offered few opportunities for him to demonstrate his competence. Bud could, for example, bring in his knowledge of Guns N' Roses to help him complete a more traditional research project. He could incorporate his experience with film viewing into the panel designs for his comic memoir.

Similar to the students in both Ferguson's (2000) and Willis's (1977) research, Bud also seemed to seek

out ways to use physical classroom space for his own purposes. During the writing time in the computer lab (vignette 1), it appeared on first glance that his only option would be writing, since his usual distractors (i.e., his friends) were all on task. Perhaps if he were given time and space devoted solely to writing, he would finally sit down and write. However, writing—as demonstrated across the vignettes—was not an activity Bud willingly did. Providing time and space was not enough of a motivation for him. Instead of using the time and space as allocated, he co-opted the writing lab space as a social and play area, with just enough writing completed to communicate to his teacher that he knew how he was supposed to use the space, without giving up his preference for avoiding writing.

As Bud tried to use classroom space for his own purposes and preserve his sense of competency in this setting, he was simultaneously being pushed into spaces he did not want to enter. Or perhaps more accurately, he was being pushed *further* into spaces he did not want to enter. The language arts classroom already held a high level of restriction for him, and his positioning by counselors and his teacher as a student in need of remediation (based on past grades and standardized test scores) heightened the gap between Bud's abilities and institutional expectations for his achievement.

The larger difficulty for Bud was that all major assignments were ultimately print-focused. Multimodal assignments were intended as bridges to print proficiency. A third space of multimodality was created, but only temporarily and only under the teacher's terms. Since the teacher controlled the space in the end, Bud's efforts to wrest the space for his own purposes were ineffective. His expertise in, for example, popular music could only be acknowledged within the parameters of a written product.

Likewise, discussion, where he was most proficient, was a space where he was often shut down by the teacher. Because Bud did not complete assigned reading, he could not participate in discussion in ways the teacher expected. When Bud tried to create a space where he had something important to say, his contributions were seen as off task and generally bypassed. I observed many discussion moments in which Bud purposely played the role of funny guy, but these

moments occurred when he had no other way into a conversation he appeared very interested in entering. He tried to reclaim discussion as a space in which he had expertise, but because discussion parameters were defined solely by print-based literacy activities, his efforts were ineffective.

Larger Implications

Several questions arise from this brief analysis of Bud's language arts classroom experience. What if teachers were to view student resistance as an effort by the student to reclaim some sense of expertise and ownership of the assignment? What might happen if students were allowed freedom to alter a learning activity, in which they don't already have control and skill, in ways that would incorporate the knowledge and skills they already have? Could assignment guidelines be created that allow students to explore third space for their own purposes as well as the official curriculum standards' purposes? What if multimodal assignments were used to open a third space that teachers and students explored together?

The course curriculum offered some multimodal thinking opportunities, and Bud responded positively to those multimodal elements. Difficulties arose, however, from the fact that multimodal assignments were always couched in a print-based framework. Students designed a research project that incorporated their interests in popular culture, but the research project had to be presented in traditional research paper format. Students used computers to communicate with one another, but they could have just as easily written the letters by hand; the unique affordances of electronic communication were not used. Because the teacher remained in control of how multimodal spaces were entered and explored, those spaces did not become a place where teacher and students could work together to create new knowledge. The assignments were subsumed into first space while appearing to offer a third space opportunity.

Rather than being used as a bridge to the knowledge that the teacher sees as truly important, multimodality needs to be recognized as a way to redefine what knowledge is valued. Multimodal assignments thereby become a means of teacher and students creating a third space together, with the teacher

recognizing students' expertise in creating digital, visual, and aural products while also acknowledging that such expertise may not be something the teacher possesses. Creating a third space shifts the balance of power in the classroom, positioning students and teachers as colearners and coteachers. Such a dynamic has the potential to reduce student resistance, because teachers and students mutually determine what knowledge and products are appropriate to meet both parties' learning goals. This dynamic also provides a way for teachers and students to resist the pressure of harmful educational mandates as they cocreate a space where they determine how effective learning occurs.

What might such an approach look like in language arts classrooms? Lankshear and Knobel (2007), in their observation that knowledge gained through new literacies is created socially rather than gathered from a single source, pointed toward an important first step: opening up a direct conversation with students. What sorts of assignments are taken seriously in language arts and why? What would happen if instead of a traditional print-based research paper, students designed a website? Would it be as real as the print-based product? Why or why not? What would happen if every unit didn't end with a written essay? What assignments belong in a language arts class and why? Bud expressed an uncertainty about whether the discussion activities he most enjoyed belonged in English class; a discussion about how multimodal assignments can become part of the language arts curriculum would be a first step in opening a third space to push against a print-dominated model.

After such a conversation, the teacher and students might take an already-planned unit and discuss how it might change if multimodal activities carried equal weight with print-based activities. Are all the texts explored in the unit print-based? What nonprint texts communicate a similar message and could be incorporated into the unit? What expertise do students have that could add to what is already present? What visual or digital products could communicate student understanding of the unit's larger concepts? Teachers may ask such questions of themselves as they plan a unit, but if a third space is to be truly opened, students need to be invited into the conversation.

Such an approach does not invalidate teacher expertise or negate the need for students to master print-based literacy tasks; it does, however, require teachers and students to think together about the purpose of language arts and how to demonstrate language arts expertise. State standards are not thrown out the window but rather incorporated into deeper-seated disciplinary thinking. Teachers can compile a list of required standards along with a list of activities that they see as meeting those standards, then ask students to think with them about how multimodal activities might be used to demonstrate mastery as well. In this way, students have a real voice in their learning, and their knowledge and experience are recognized.

I believe, along with Britzman (1998), that education can be "something different than repression and normalization, something that is capable of surprising itself, something interested in risking itself" (p. 58). In order for education to surprise itself and take risks, however, there needs to be space for such risk taking to happen. Using multimodality as a way to create a third space within the language arts curriculum offers opportunities for students to see their knowledge as valid in a setting that typically sees student knowledge as irrelevant. Multimodal assignments become a space through which students and teachers learn to evaluate their current knowledge levels and explore how those levels can be increased.

Looking at Bud's responses to classroom activities through a third space lens opens the possibility that student refusal to read and write may not be due to lack of something important to say or lack of ability. It may be due to lack of connection. I don't pretend that third space theory is a magic bullet to solve educational ills. I think it can, however, provide an arena for reexamining how knowledge can be cocreated within the classroom. When teachers and students are working together within a third space, then hopefully all classroom participants will become engaged in a shared goal of using knowledge to improve their world.

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Benson teaches at West Virginia University, Morgantown, USA; e-mail sheila.benson@mail.wvu.edu.

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