Acknowledging the Provocative Within the (Curricular) Textual Act

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Typically, except in the case of conference events such as the Provoking Curriculum Conference that was the impulse for this collaborative work, within the world of curricular theorizing, the most common components are words on paper or words on a computer screen: somebody writes the words and somebody reads them. Curricular theorizing is most often considered an intellectual act (and in terms of the somebodies reading and...
writing, the mind part of their bodies comes to mind). Curricular theorizing is also a textual act. Somebody composes the text and somebody adds to or contests, or attempts to complete that textual act by reading the text. And somewhere, tucked away within that textual act, are the identities of the “somebodies.” To me, the textual part, within the intellectual act, is a provocative aspect of curricular theorizing.

As writers involved in textual acts, our hope or desire seems to be that we will not be too evident in the text—that is, we hope that the words will stand on their own two feet. At the same time, I think we also have the desire, as writers, to play a game of hide and seek. And just like in the game of hide and seek, where we do not want to be found but we do, there is the desire within curricular textual acts that somebody will somehow find our location in the text; if somebody reads our words, small hints about our identity will appear—just enough to entice, to tease, to provoke somebody. But remember that game of hide and seek when your hiding place was so good that you were not found, and the game went on without you and finally you felt so left out that you ran out shouting “Here I am!”

As writers in the textual act, we don’t want to be found, but we do. And as readers in our textual acts, I think we do want to know the writer, but we don’t. We tell ourselves that this textual act is not really about that. We are intrigued, intellectually, by the words, and the words alone. After all, what do the words on the page really have to do with the identity of the writer, albeit the textually mediated identity of the writer?

I think that in most textual acts of composing curricular texts, we play pretend. Even though we know that the words on the page resided in somebody before they appeared on the page of the journal article or textbook chapter, we pretend that those words are not connected in any way to that body any longer. And we pretend that we do not really want to know anything about that body’s life, when in fact, I think we do.

As one body who reads curricular compositions, I want to but I don’t want to see the composer. I am intrigued at some level by the identity of the author. By the somebody who wrote the words. When I read an edited collection, I immediately flip to the brief bio notes from the contributors located usually, at the end of the collection—some sort of protocol about the textual act—you read the words first, pretending they are disembodied text, and then you acknowledge the embodied nature of words on pages. And if there are photos, double bonus.

And, as one body who writes curricular texts, I want readers to see me but I don’t because that would ruin the theoretical or perhaps “theatrical” fun. That would diminish the provocative possibility of the textual act. It’s like the long black dress with the sheer panel in the bodice and long sheer sleeves. Or the crisp white shirt that is buttoned up so that the collar stops just below an Adam’s apple. It’s about what we say but we don’t say in our
text. Revealing too much is not that provocative. It is not that sexy. (And here, my use of the iconic black dress or crisp white shirt is a reference, admittedly to what is socially accepted with popular culture in the Western world as sexy.)

Perhaps politics plays a part in the provocative nature of composing/exposing our identities in curricular textual acts. Politically there are reasons for not revealing or acknowledging our bodily, material identities. Reasons related to gender, race, class, reasons related to exclusion, to discrimination, or even, within some scholarly traditions reasons related to “reasoning”—to what is accepted as “intellectual.” Yet, as composition readers, we want to know about these very same political aspects in relation to the writer—well, in relation to the text, to the words on the page. We read the text for hints of identity. In fact, we are encouraged to do so, in order to determine the “validity” of the text. In their book Mapping Social Relations (2002), M. Campbell and F. Gregor encourage us, as readers of research text, to try to get a picture of the writer. To try to find hints in the text that will alert us to the (philosophical, political, and closely connected, personal) positioning and identity of the writer. And as writers of research text, we are encouraged to position ourselves in relation to our research, and to “come clean,” to inform readers of our position.

What is provocative about curricular textual acts, to me, is that feeling “sort of in my stomach” that I sometimes get when I am involved in the act as a writer/reader. It is similar to that feeling I would get when I was a child or even now as a middle-aged adult, when I put on a costume and disguise myself and note how people react to me. Never having to reveal who I really am, but really wanting to, wanting people to guess my identity, but not wanting them to, dropping little hints about who I am, seeing if I can prolong the suspense, increase the desire of those who are “reading” me, increase their desire to want to know my true identity—to really know me. It is provocative to play hide and seek in the text regarding our embodied identities, and it is also provocative to me, to imagine the body, the face, the sound of the voice, to wonder about the everydayness of the lives of the readers/writers.
And then, a conference happens, and we get to see the somebodies. We see the bodies where the words lived before they became text on a page or on a computer screen. We get to hear their voices and see the faces and bodies attached to the writers, and what they wear. And, as writers/presenters, we get to see the somebodies who are “reading” us, we get to see their faces and bodies and what they wear. A highlight in my curricular theory life was finally getting to see Maxine Greene. I had never even heard her voice. And then, in Montreal (on the threshold of the twenty-first century), I saw her and heard her wonderfully rich New York sounding voice. She ended her very provocative text with a call to curricular scholars to embrace passion and eros. To me, passion and eros are provocative possibilities. It is not just about what we look like or what we wear, although it is about that too—very recently at a sociology conference on another continent I was part of this conversation in the lobby before a presentation…

Ooh, what a great outfit
I love those pants
Do you think people will take me seriously if I am wearing red?
Oh, for sure.
But pink!
Never wear pink.

It is not just about what we look like or what we wear, it is about the possibilities that open up in our textual acts when we acknowledge the personal, the embodied act of composing/exposing our text and our identities. And anyway, intellectual…rhymes with textual…rhymes
with…I think there must be a reason for the rhyme…

References


About the Author

**Wanda Hurren**—I am interested in issues of identity, place, and curriculum. Poststructural perspectives and other boundary blurring mechanisms inform my research and writing. I am presently conducting a three year study that explores identity and spatial practices in public schooling.

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