

Emergent Recognition: An Alternative Perspective on the Grey Literature of an American Public High School, 1985-2001

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Horizons

Abstract

The grey literature produced by a social body records and reveals interactions and communications which would otherwise remain only vaguely remembered or not at all: it offers alternative (plural) forms of memory for analysis. The cybernetic apparatus linked to the 'telephone lines' has greatly facilitated and amplified the production of GL.

The effects of the introduction of the cybernetic apparatus (computers, internet) on an alternative school program ("Horizons") within a specific social body, Branford High School, an American public school serving a small and relatively affluent shoreline community of about 30,000 in the Connecticut, will be analyzed here in terms of its grey literature production across a 16 year period (from 1985-2001).

Branford High School itself services approximately 1,000 students a year, with a teaching staff of about 80, close to a dozen administrators (with secretaries), a maintenance staff of around 6. The "Horizons" program, operating within Branford High School, services some 60 of these thousand students a year, those who have been identified as "at risk", or as "disaffected learners" (two terms of many from its grey literature). It forms a sort of school within a school, and presently consists of 8 teachers, an administrator and a social worker. -- I worked as a teacher of English (language and literature) in this program during that time, and offer my observations from that perspective.

Following the basic definition of grey literature, as given in the program guide of this conference: "Information produced on all levels of government, academics, business and industry in electronic and print formats not controlled by commercial publishing" - I offer, as theoretical framework, these four levels of discourse within the literature of Horizons and Branford High School:

- 1) of the students (product/clientele/industry)
- 2) of the teachers (knowledge/expertise/academia)
- 3) of the administrators (business)
- 4) of the law (juridico-legislative, government).

I link these further with the four discourse model, and attendant schemas and algorithms, proposed by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, as elaborated by Dr Theaux - a model to which we shall return, following a brief introduction to and history of the "Horizons Program" in Branford.

The "Horizons Program" began originally under the name of "Basic Studies", in 1973, with 4 teachers and one supervisor, as a program intended to get high school drop-outs off the streets (where it was feared they were engaging in socially unproductive and criminal behavior), and back into the classroom, with a view to turning them into socially productive members of the community. During this time it was also referred to (by number) as the "2 to 4 Program", referring to its part-time hours of operation after the end of the regular school day. Shortly after I joined in 1985 it was expanded to a full-time program, brought within the regular school day, and renamed the "Core Program" - referring to its focus on the 'Core' areas of study: English, Math, Social Studies (formerly called 'History'), and Science. A year or so after this it was expanded again, to two full time programs, one focusing on the younger students (generally in their first two years of high school), and the other on the older students (generally in their last two). The teaching staff was doubled to 8, along with a part-time social worker.

Alternative programs in general have proliferated during the last half century or so in the American school system, driven in part by a 'rhetoric of crisis' strongly marked in its grey literature. This rhetoric of crisis has also driven the proliferation of new methods and types of teaching - one of the first I remember from my childhood was "New Math", back in the 1960's - today, the presentation of such new modes during regularly scheduled 'professional workshop days' and elsewhere has become a thriving business - my colleagues and I used to joke that we should come up with something "new and improved" with a fancy title (like: 'Teaching Aperture - a Way Out of the Box') and market it to schools nationwide in order to make more money than we were as simple teachers. -- Anyway, in addition to New Math, there has been the 'Whole Language' approach to reading and writing, 'hooked on phonics', 'back to basics', 'bell to bell teaching', 'learning to learn strategies', 'integrated teaching', 'cooperative learning', 'performance based education' -- to mention just a few of the grey buzz-words and attendant educational movements..

This rhetoric of crisis is, of course, not specific only to the last half century of American education; it is found in the literature of American advertising of this time, where products are continually being marketed as 'new and improved', 'better', 'bigger', etc. It also applies to the whole of the 20th century, from 'modernism' through 'deconstruction' to 'post-modernism' and beyond. Nor need we stop there, historically speaking: we can trace it back further to the grey pamphlets and posters of the revolutions