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## The Relationship between Mass Media and Classroom Discourse

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## The Relationship between Mass Media and Classroom Discourse

### Abstract

In this paper, I illustrate the cyclical proliferation of mass-mediated communicative repertoires through small-scale mechanisms of classroom discourse. I draw on examples of current advertising, classroom discourse data from diverse studies, my own study of an elementary ESL group's interaction, and mass mediated representations of classroom discourse on websites and TV shows about school to illustrate the relationship between mass media and classroom discourse. I analyze how mass-mediated metadiscourse creates new participation frameworks in classrooms that propel small-scale changes in classroom discourse and potentially facilitate the integration of new voices. Finally I discuss the implications of this analysis for how future research conceptualizes the roles of multilingual/multicultural students and teachers and the multiple communicative repertoires they command.

### Keywords

mass media, classroom discourse, linguistic anthropology, consumerism

### Disciplines

Anthropology | Communication | Education | Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures

### Comments

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## **The Relationship between Mass Media and Classroom Discourse**

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In this paper, I illustrate the cyclical proliferation of mass-mediated communicative repertoires through small-scale mechanisms of classroom discourse. I draw on examples of current advertising, classroom discourse data from diverse studies, my own study of an elementary ESL group's interaction, and mass mediated representations of classroom discourse on websites and TV shows about school to illustrate the relationship between mass media and classroom discourse. I analyze how mass-mediated metadiscourse creates new participation frameworks in classrooms that propel small-scale changes in classroom discourse and potentially facilitate the integration of new voices. Finally I discuss the implications of this analysis for how future research conceptualizes the roles of multilingual/multicultural students and teachers and the multiple communicative repertoires they command.

Think, for a moment, of the demeanors that are projected on a popular TV show, a billboard you drive by everyday, or an ad in a magazine. Many of us have probably had occasions when we get the impression that those demeanors are being re-enacted by our children or our students. Are these kinds of mass-mediated demeanors permeating classroom life and affecting learning, and if so, how? This paper offers a preliminary investigation into how children bring mass-mediated demeanors into the classroom from the outside world, how these widely circulating models of personhood are propelled by small-scale mechanisms of classroom discourse, and how these forms of personhood co-exist with more traditional models of classroom conduct. Finally, I illustrate how these mass-mediated demeanors are then recirculated through kid-authored metadiscourses about what happens in schools.

Increasingly in the U.S., K-12 classrooms are places where multiple ways of speaking, or "communicative repertoires" (Hymes, 1972) are in use. These repertoires include multiple languages, varieties and registers. As I will argue, communicative repertoires that are circulated and recirculated via contemporary mass media (such as the internet) have become widely accepted as common parlance in today's classrooms. The mass mediated genres that show up in the classroom (and are then recirculated through more mass mediated channels) are significantly reshaping participation in classroom discourse.

This change has implications for how future research conceptualizes the roles of multilingual/multicultural students and teachers and the multiple communicative repertoires they command: For example, examining how English Language Learners participate in mass mediated genres in classrooms makes visible how multilingualism and register range can be resources for staking claim to new, authoritative participant roles in classroom discourse. Likewise examining how teachers participate in multiple genres in the classroom provides a new perspective on what a diverse teacher workforce can bring to the classroom. Multilingual and multicultural teachers do not simply bring a generic cultural or linguistic "sameness" to students whom they superficially resemble. Rather, diverse teachers may be better positioned to connect with all students because they are aware of their own vast register range, including a range of language choices—e.g.,

Spanish, English, African American English, Chicano English—and how they can use a range of communicative repertoires to form new participation frameworks with students, peers, and parents.

A look at widely circulated mass mediated models of conduct gives us the empirical means to understand exactly how this command of diverse communicative repertoires is not only a uniquely contemporary asset in today's classroom discourse, but also, a resource whose impact extends far beyond the classroom.

### **Mass Mediated Models of Conduct for Teachers and Students**

The way students and teachers act and talk in classrooms comes from somewhere. They do not just “Act Naturally” (to borrow the words of Country Singing Legend Buck Owens). Students and teachers draw on culturally mediated models of conduct, adapting them as they speak, to their context. Obviously, teachers are introduced to a huge range of models of conduct through teacher education, professional development, and their own independent study. These media project distinct models of conduct and personal demeanors for teachers (and students) to take up in the classroom. Some may be advertised as “scientifically based;” some may have illustrations of radical, longhaired Marxists on the cover; others may feature fun and colorful packaging, suggesting the sheer fun of basic skills. (Take a look at the next “professional” book you buy—what sort of demeanor is it projecting for you?)

Such teacher education materials are genres of metadiscourse—models about how discourse should proceed in classrooms. There are traditional genres: In these, teaching is conceived of as “telling and questioning,” the three-part IRE routine (Initiation, Response, Evaluation) (Mehan, 1985) is a staple, teachers do most of the talking, and teachers are projected as the primary source of knowledge in the classroom (Goodlad, 1976). This traditional model for a teacher persona is very different from non-traditional metadiscourses of teaching as “critical pedagogy” (McClaren & Kincheloe, 2007) or “subversive activity” (Postman & Weingartner, 1971) in which discussion and questioning are key classroom genres, and in which teachers are not the sole source of knowledge, but seen as “border workers” (Giroux, 1991) integrating different kinds of knowledge.

Students, however, typically do not read their teachers' materials, and therefore are not directly exposed to the models of conduct presented for them in those materials. Many do, however, habitually take in hours of movies, TV, Internet, and advertising, media that also project distinct models of conduct and personal demeanors (and as I will explain later, even demeanors specific to classrooms and schools). Even if students do not watch TV, movies or use the Internet themselves, they actively participate in these genres through peers and the way those peers interact. These various forms of mass media—both those consumed by teachers and by students—inevitably are reproduced and altered through small-scale mechanisms of classroom discourse. In the following section, I examine the details different mass media that marketing traditions offer up as models of conduct.

## Marketing Metadiscourse and Classroom Discourse

Just as there are traditional and contemporary classrooms, the market economy operates in both traditional and contemporary ways. In traditional classrooms, cultural capital (like being a native speaker of English) is conceived of as a relatively stable asset; similarly, from the traditional marketing perspective, certain forms of consumption, like wearing the “best” clothes, living in the “best” neighborhood, and driving the “best” car are stable consumer icons that mark class in immutable ways. Traditional marketing emphasizes replication, and advertising works to associate a certain brand with quality. Consumers are seen as passive, malleable masses who, once convinced that this clothing item or car is the “best” will be driven, lemming-like, to attain it. By the same token, traditional classrooms focus on replicating standard language and standard knowledge, and the student is seen as a passive recipient of these received standards and forms or knowledge.

In contrast, contemporary marketing sees consumption as producing new forms of sociability. Rather than identifying the “right” product through top-down advertising practices, the focus is often not on any specifically identifiable features of a product, but on how it is taken up and noticed by the consumer. These days, some ads are even *about* ads, and only indirectly about the product being sold (“A Big Ad” for Carlton Draught Beer is a recent example. This ad touts its own bigness throughout—using a cast of thousands (a la *Lord of the Rings* movies) to sell the beer, but simultaneously mocking its own ridiculous scale. See [http://www.metacafe.com/watch/283486/its\\_a\\_big\\_ad/](http://www.metacafe.com/watch/283486/its_a_big_ad/)). In this way, contemporary consumers are not positioned as passive recipients of information and recommendations from industries about the “best” product, but rather as independent, savvy thinkers who maintain ironic distance from products—even as they consume them (Frank). Contemporary marketized forms of sociability proliferate in classrooms too. As I will illustrate in the remainder of the paper, just as consumers take up ironic, knowing stances about products and the ways they are marketed, students in classrooms seem, increasingly, to take up such knowing, ironic stances about classroom discourse itself. Below, I outline the possible mechanisms for this proliferation.

### Spreading Mass Mediated Demeanors: Metadiscourse and Participation

There are (at least) two critical mechanisms for the proliferation of these contemporary forms of sociability: 1) Metadiscourse, and 2) the participation frameworks they afford (Agha, 2007a).

#### *Metadiscourse*

Metadiscourse is commentary *about* language-in-use. Metaphonetic discourse is talk *about* how something sounds; metasemantic about how something means, metapragmatic, about what something is doing. *Metacultural* discourse is commentary on a cultural object (like a movie or a poem). Much of what one does in English class (e.g., discussing a poem) is metacultural discourse. Any movie review is metacultural discourse. Websites like “metacafe,” where commercials like “A Big Ad” are displayed and commented on, are metacultural discourse sites. So, metadiscourse is commentary

about language, and it varies in the specificity of its linguistic target, from a phoneme, to an entire stretch of text. Metadiscourse can also vary in the degree to which it is implicit or explicit. Correcting someone's pronunciation (It's ToMAHto, not toMAYto!), for example, would be explicit metaphonetic commentary. Mocking someone's pronunciation in quoted speech on the other hand, would be implicit metaphonetic commentary (e.g., "My South Georgia cousin's like, "Hey, *Honeychile!* Y'all come back now, y'hear?").

Metadiscourses are always in flux and give historical periods their social flavor. Victorian times, for example, might be characterized by technical, freeze-dried metadiscourse surrounding sexuality (Foucault, 1978). These days, arguably, could be characterized by *metadiscourse* that emphasizes critique, play, creativity, and irony (as exemplified by ads *about* ads which are simultaneously *about* movies). These metadiscourses are profligate in the contemporary marketplace. Through such ironic metadiscourses, advertising constructs the consumer (even as this consumer is shelling out cash to fit in with the hippest crowd) as counter-cultural and rebellious (Frank 1997b, p. 41). So, drinking a Carlton Draught beer might suggest you recognize the irony in the commercial, or the *Lord of the Rings* parody, and appreciate it. Advertisers provide a kind of up-to-date, hip communicative repertoire for consumers, a repertoire that is replicated along with the purchase of a product (or even without it—as one contributor to the Big Ad metacommentary writes, "i can't decide which i love more beer or beer commercials.")

### *Participation frameworks*

These kinds of metadiscourses proliferate by generating new participation frameworks. By participation framework, I mean not only the configuration of roles taken up by all participants interacting in a face-to-face moment (Goffman, 1979), but also the configuration of roles in mass-mediated, non face-to-face speech events like a commercial or an internet blog (Agha, 2007). People who have seen the same commercial, while not face-to-face with each other, are still part of a large scale, mass-mediated participation framework. This affords the genesis of new, small-scale participation frameworks when individuals exposed to similar mass mediated communicative repertoires come into contact and recognize each other as valid participants. A display of coffee snobbery needs a collection of like-minded coffee drinkers (who have been exposed to similar mass-mediated markets) for it to make sense (Roseberry, 1996). Using "hip irony" effectively requires a cohort of people who will recognize irony and concur that it is, indeed, hip. Therefore, invoking certain marketized communicative repertoires can potentially recreate mass-market-oriented participation frameworks in any small-scale context. In classrooms, for example, a reference to a rap singer or a *Lord of the Rings*-inspired commercial can suddenly create a participation framework that includes relevant classroom peers and excludes the teacher.

Because participation frameworks are so vital to the spread of media messages, contemporary forms of mass media (e-mail and the internet, for example) have spawned "viral" marketing practices that use existing peer networks to spread this new metadiscourse far and wide (Moore, 2003). The You Tube phenomenon is a prime

example of this sort of metacultural proliferation through peer-centered participation frameworks. Some advertisers even use U-Tube (rather than paid television space) as their primary distributor. The Big Ad mentioned above, for Carlton Draught Beer, was released on U-Tube two weeks prior to television distribution. Its viral distribution was so successful that subsequent TV release was scaled back (Lees, 2005). On websites like U-Tube or Metacafe, video-viewers then dialog about the ad or forward the link to peers with comments about the ad. So, these mass mediated peer networks, controlled by both marketers and consumers, have become critical media for new kinds of metadiscursive sociability.

Because peer networks are important to spreading a (consumer) message, companies are not just projecting messages about products to consumers. Instead industries are concerned with how consumers interact as groups around their products. So, industries monitor and encourage a proliferation of subcultures and “brand communities” built through consumption practices. Gee (2001) has discussed the example of Saturn car owners as a brand community—people who own Saturns are seen as certain types. The Saturn Company tries to strengthen this brand community by hosting websites and even face-to-face Bar-B-Qs for Saturn owners. Similarly there are Volvo people, Saab people, Honda people; Starbucks people versus independent coffee house people; MAC vs. PC people. Consumers are active in selecting the community they want to be identified with, and in how brands are involved (and discussed) in their daily social round.

In schools there are also countless brand communities, some ephemeral, some seemingly intractable, with specific identities attached to them: fans of Pokemon and Yugiyo (Japanese animation characters), Runescape and FlyFF (online games); the New England Patriots or the Philadelphia Eagles (football team brands); Green Day (the band) or Soulja Boy Tellem (the Rapper). These brand communities can be invoked through certain communicative repertoires—wearing certain kinds of clothing and, of course, talking a certain kind of talk or using a signature phrase. When these communicative repertoires show up in the classroom they can instantly refigure participation along the lines of their brand communities, perhaps even excluding the teacher who may have no idea what their students are discussing (cf. Rymes, 2004).

### **Marketized Metadiscourses and Participation in Classrooms**

Obviously, marketing that relies on peer networks and metadiscourse is qualitatively and dramatically different from traditional top-down hard-sell marketing that emphasizes the “best” product. Following suit, contemporary classroom discourse is far different from traditional, top-down models of instruction. The contemporary mass media, marked by more informal, jokey, or ironic and rebellious—more kid-like—communicative repertoires (and spread via peer networks/brand communities) have also made their mark on contemporary classroom discourse. Each genre listed in Table 1 is an example of how relatively standardized models of conduct in traditional classrooms have taken on these contemporary, marketized characteristics.

The IRE routine, for example, has been shown to be subject to endless forms of meta-commentary and language play in the classrooms that Ben Rampton has been

researching in London (Rampton, 2006). And, in a similar way, as he has pointed out, my research with Kris Gutierrez and Joanne Larson (Gutierrez, Rymes & Larson, 1995) has illustrated how a typical “current events” routine, in which students are earnestly urged to discuss front page issues from the local newspaper becomes instead a resource for enacting a host of other issues of concern to the students. Also, “Sharing Time”, that section of class when students tell stories about their own lives, became, in an alternative school in Los Angeles, a time for students to assert their identities not by listening patiently to their peers, but by debunking the premises of students’ stories (Rymes, 2001). Rampton (2006) has also shown how Foreign Language in public schools is no longer simply a form of prestige cultural capital, but a resource for enacting different momentary and often silly-sounding social positions. Conversely, non-native pronunciation has lately been shown by multiple researchers to be something many students and even teachers perceive as not a liability, but an asset and a resource for navigating varied social terrain (Reyes, 2007). And last, I have observed the lock-step sounding out procedures undertaken with words during the Phonics game, being taken up by kids as an exercise in language play that produces new forms of participation and expertise that stray far from the teacher’s knowledge domain (Rymes, 2004).

**Table 1: Differences between Traditional and Contemporary Classroom Discourse**

| <b>Traditional</b>                                   | <b>Contemporary</b>   |
|--|---|
| IRE (initiation, response, evaluation; Mehan, 1985)  | Meta commentary on IRE (Rampton, 2006)  |
| Current events                                       | Rescripting the news (Gutierrez, Rymes, Larson, 1995)   |
| Sharing time (Michaels, 1981)                        | Story-debunking (Rymes, 2001)   |
| Foreign languages as prestige cultural capital       | Foreign language as resource for sociability (Rampton, 2006)  |
| Non-native pronunciation corrected by model speakers | Non-native pronunciation as a resource for social navigation (Rymes, Cahnmann, Souto-Manning, 2006; Reyes, 2007). |
| Phonics as sounding out                              | Phonics words as resources for metacommentary and new forms of participation (Rymes, 2004).                       |

In the following sections, I examine two of these examples in detail to illustrate how small scale mechanisms in classroom discourse provide participation frameworks within which students enact widely circulating, large scale models of conduct.



*From I-R-E to I-R-Weeeeeeeee!*

Rampton’s (2006) research has begun to illustrate how students routinely do the non-routine by playing with the expectations of the IRE formula. As Table 2, below, illustrates, where typically the teacher is solely responsible for the initiation component (e.g., What’s two plus two?), at Rampton’s research site, “Central High” boys often finished the teacher’s sentences, sometimes even reformulating his questions. The boys also frequently provided evaluations for each other’s responses, traditionally the sole task of the teacher.

**Table 2: Students show involvement by breaching the typical IRE pattern (adapted from Rampton, 2006)**

| Type of Act | Traditional | “Central High”                     |
|-------------|-------------|------------------------------------|
| Initiation  | Teacher     | Boys finish teachers sentences     |
| Response    | Student     | Student                            |
| Evaluation  | Teacher     | Boys evaluate each other’s answers |

The example below illustrates students jumping in during the “initiation” turn to finish the teacher’s sentences.

**Example 1: Boys finish teacher’s sentences (adapted from Rampton, 2006):**

Teacher: if you look at the big newspapers today (1.0)  
you’ll find that they’ve all got these/erm  
John: car crashes  
Teacher: charts: (1.5).  
they’re called league tables  
Anon M: of schools.  
Teacher: about all the primary schools  
John: of schools  
good and bad yeh

Another example from Rampton illustrates how students interrupt the teacher’s initiation turn to play with his language:

**Example 2: Boys play with the teacher’s language (adapted from Rampton, 2006)**

Teacher: in a court you know  
you’re not going to  
say “hi there judgey!” } *metaphonetic savoring*  
Hanif: judgey!  
Teacher: even if he’s your best friend.  
Hanif: a’wi’mate  
 (“all right mate”) } *metapragmatic savoring*

Using Deborah Tannen’s (1989) term “savoring,” Rampton describes this sort of metacommentary as a form of involvement. These students are not seen as disrupting class, but simply participating in a particularly “contrapuntal” way. In the transcript, I’ve drawn attention to the particular genre of metadiscourse at play of this form of participation. At first, Hanif savors, metaphonetically, the playful honorific, “judgey”. Then, he savors the metapragmatic concept of how you might talk to the judge disrespectfully, by saying “a’wi’mate” in a distinctly cockney voice.

These examples illustrate how students take up contemporary genres of metadiscourse within the traditional IRE formula. For these students, meta-commentary is a critical tool to display simultaneously the knowledge of school and the need to appropriate school knowledge on their own terms. Rampton argues that these changes are part of a “wider historical shift in socio-communicative relations” (p. 31). But how has this “shift” come about? I would argue that it is largely driven by marketized ways of speaking circulating through mass media like the internet. Just like productive “consumers” in the marketplace, students orient to classroom talk as an object not to be replicated in procedural detail, but to do with what they will. Just like “rebel” consumers, they are not really rebelling from classroom talk; Instead, as Rampton illustrates, they consistently display a “commitment to school knowledge often combined with a lack of regard for procedural decorum managed by the teacher” (p. 31).

The following example, a very different setting, Los Angeles now, not London, also illustrates an initiation question—this time during a current events activity—that gets taken up creatively by students.

**Example 3: Metacommentary in a Los Angeles High-School (Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1996).**

Teacher: What did the Supreme Court decision in **Brown**  
versus the Board of Education have to do  
with?  
StudentA: **James Brown?** } *metasemantic and metacultural*  
StudentB: **Al Green!** } *commentary*

Here, Student A’s “James Brown,” plays, metasemantically, with the “brown” in the teachers’ utterance. And “Al Green” plays, both metasemantically and metaculturally with the newly introduced category of pop singers. Students play off the semantics of “brown” and “green” and simultaneously display their own knowledge of popular musicians, their own facile and funny use of language, and their disregard for the anniversary of the Supreme Court Case. Simultaneously, students dethrone the *LA Times* as sole information source available in this current events session.

Again, like Rampton’s “Judgey” example and others, the James Brown example shows how meta-commentary simultaneously displays knowledge of school routines and participation within the appropriate slots, as well as how students can use this knowledge creatively and on their own terms. Students’ word play also opens up the interaction to new forms of participation and expertise. After Student A calls out “James Brown” and Student B chimes in with “Al Green,” the participation framework shifts from one that alternates student voices with the teacher’s to one in which multiple students provide multiple responses in the traditional student “response” slot. In both these respects—through their use of metacommentary to appropriate classroom routines, and their construction of new forms of participation within those routines—students act like productive “consumers” in the marketplace. They are both appropriating classroom discursive objects for their own ends, and “rebellious” (in Frank’s (1997a) sense of “rebel” consumers) while staying within the confines of classroom decorum.

*From Storytime to Story-Debunking Time*

Just as students in contemporary classrooms in London and Los Angeles contest the typical IRE frame, students in another school perform new ways of treating “story time.” In example 4 (below), at an alternative high-school in Los Angeles, students are telling stories to me about their previous school experiences during a Friday morning designated “discussion group” I ran. Jerson had just told me a long story about being arrested in class after the Los Angeles Police Department searched his locker and found illegal substances. After Jerson concluded, I offered my own summation.

**Example 4: An alternative high school in Los Angeles (Rymes, 2001)**

(Jerson has just told a long story about being arrested during class).

|         |                                      |                        |
|---------|--------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Betsy:  | Wow. You must have been embarrassed. |                        |
| Jerson: | Naw, I’m used to it.                 |                        |
| Manny:  | See that’s what I’m saying.          | } <i>metapragmatic</i> |
|         | He just says that to be cool.        |                        |

Rather than letting Jerson continue to project his cool self here, with “Naw, I’m used to it,” his peer, Manny critiques the entire premise of this story and every story he has told about illicit activities he has been involved in. This excerpt illustrates how in a contemporary classrooms, not only do students take up new and very different story recipient stances, but what counts as a “rebel” stance changes according to context. Here,

Manny's debunking of Jerson's story displays not so much knowledge of "school" routines, but knowledge of "Cool" routines, which he has named and appropriated on his own terms. He can be cool by debunking Jerson's attempt to display coolness. Just as students in the other examples altered the IRE turn-taking participation framework, Manny, by commenting on Jerson's response, alters the expectation that I, as researcher and official interviewer, would be the only one to supply the evaluative turn after stories are finished.

These examples have begun to illustrate how we might begin to link small scale discourse analysis in classrooms to large scale mass-mediated social formations. But the question remains, how is the particularity of discourse analysis in classrooms related to entrenched mass-mediated expectations and stereotypes that inform language use inside the classroom. Up until now, we have seen single instances of what I have claimed are a genre of metacommentary. I have illustrated that these genres resemble more widely circulating, mass-mediated genres of meta-commentary such as the "rebel" and "productive" consumer. I have also shown how, through these forms of metacommentary students change participation frameworks in classrooms, in a way that also resembles how brand communities develop around common consumption practices. Mentioning "James Brown and Al Green" for example, includes students and potentially excludes the teacher as a primary participant.

What happens to these widely circulating metadiscourses in classroom discourse? Are they just blips or off-hand enactments of stances we recognize as more widely circulating outside the classroom? Or, do they have lasting effects on the kinds of talk and participation frameworks that become habit in classrooms? The following series of examples will illustrate how these new genres of metacommentary are sustained across a trajectory of multiple classroom interactions that center on The Phonics Game.<sup>TM</sup>

#### *From Pronunciation to Excitation*

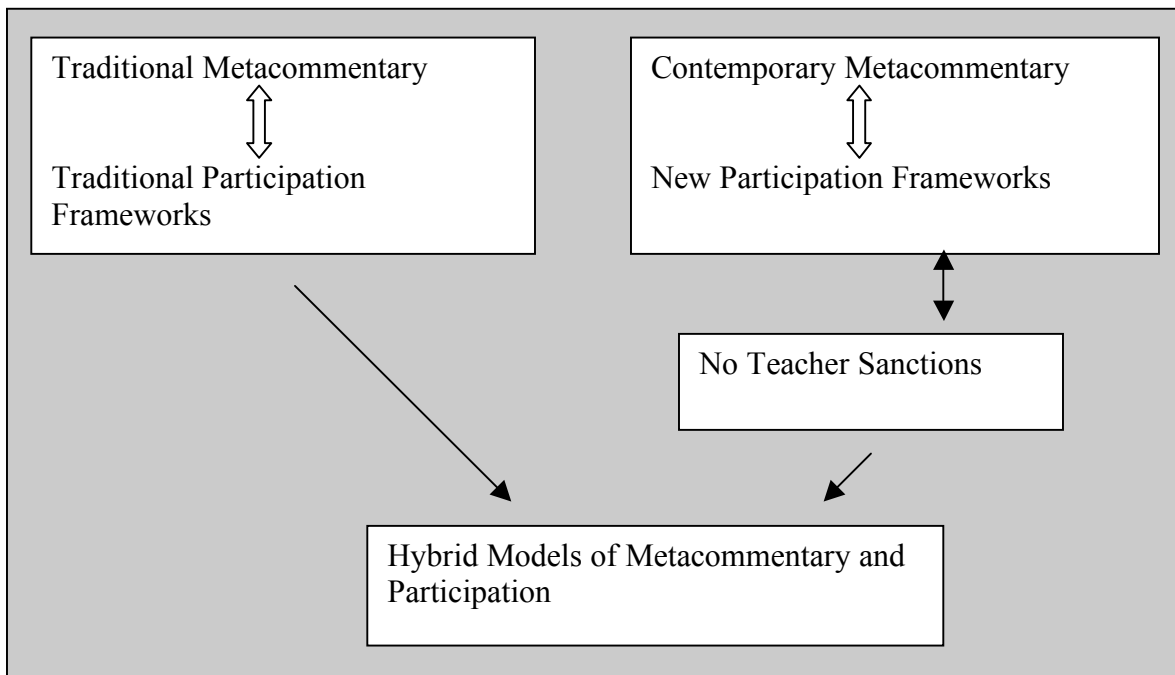
The rest of my examples come from a semester long set of sessions in which a pullout group of Elementary-school-aged, English as a Second Language Students are playing the Phonics Game. Participants in this group range from second to fourth graders and beginning to intermediate level English speakers. While The Phonics Game is not designed for English language learners, this teacher sought special approval from her principal to purchase the game and use it as a tool to introduce these students to English reading. In the Phonics Game, through an elaborate series of card games, students are to learn all the rules needed to sound out English words. One of the first games is called "Silent Partners" and involves understanding how "magic e" works. The expected activity is simply to read a word like "dude" without the magic e ("dud"), then to tack it on and see how the vowel sound magically changes ("dude").

In the classroom I studied, phonics game play was permeated with traditional genres of metacommentary such as metaphonetic other-correction by the teacher (as when she corrects the pronunciation of the word "dude") and explicit rule statements. But these phonics lessons were also marked by contemporary genres of metacommentary like those

we've seen in the previous examples. These sorts of metacommentary include wordplay (like the James Brown/Al Green word play), metapragmatic enactments (like the imagined interaction with the judge when the student enacts a cockney "a'wi'mate and metaphonetic savoring (as when the students appreciatively repeat the teachers cutesy "judgey!" example).

In the phonics examples, traditional metacommentary invokes traditional teacher-centered participation frameworks. But this co-exists with modern metacommentary that brings about new participation frameworks and expert roles. Furthermore, as in the previous, single instance examples, during the phonics lessons the teacher does not reprimand children for this contemporary behavior. Therefore, over time, hybrid models of metacommentary develop such that multiple genres of metacommentary and participation are in play at the same time (See Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Phonics Game Play: Mixing traditional and modern metacommentary**



The following sets of examples illustrate the processes in Figure 1. The example below illustrates traditional, teacher directed, metaphonetic commentary and Phonics Game play (Upper left corner in Figure 1, above). Rolando has just picked a game card with the word *dude* printed on it and the teacher is helping him sound it out—first without Magic E, then with Magic E.

**Example 5: Traditional, metaphonetic commentary in The Phonics Game™**

Teacher: -d- -u- -d-. [duh -uhd

Rolando: [duhd]  
 Teacher: Yes, duhd. If you add the –e-, the- the – u- is gonna go o:o.  
 duh o:od.  
 Rolando: dude.  
 Teacher: dude.

Here, we see traditional genres of metacommentary in which sounding out and standard rules are fore-grounded. The relevant participation here is an orderly and traditional teacher-student-teacher-student exchange in which the teacher inhabits an expert role. Within this traditional communicative repertoire, the word *dude* in this classroom will be used exclusively to illustrate the long “u” sound that emerges in the presence of magic “e.” The implication also is that docile students will follow the teacher’s modeled behavior.

Subsequently, however, the interaction changes when Rene pipes up with a different genre of metacommentary on the use of the word *dude* (as characterized in the upper right corner, Figure 1):

**Example 6: From phonics to improvisational word play**

2-11-00 Dude

|          |            |   |   |
|----------|------------|---|---|
| Rolando: | dude.      | } | <i>metaphonetic activity (traditional)</i>        |
| Teacher: | dude.      |   |   |
| Rene:    | ((laughs)) | } | <i>metapragmatic improvisation (contemporary)</i> |
|          | Hey du:de. |   |   |
|          | ((laughs)) |   |   |
| Teacher: | ((laughs)) |   |   |

By calling out “hey dude!” Rene takes up a new stance as a phonics game player. He displays both knowledge of the word in focus and how to say it, but he also adds his own creative metapragmatic commentary on the word, appropriating it for his own momentary social uses. This new use of *dude* in turn creates a new participation framework. By calling out “hey dude”, Rene invokes the “users-of-dude-as-a-vocative” community. And, the teacher takes on a more student-like role by laughing at Rene’s comment, momentarily abandoning her expert role. Again, as we’ve seen in previous interactions, Rene, in this example acts like a “productive consumer,” using classroom discursive objects (namely the word *dude*) for his own end. He is also like a “rebel consumer”—acting like a rebel without really rebelling—staying within the confines of this classroom’s protocol. In the meantime, just as consumers create brand communities around coffee or computers, Rene is actively producing his own particular *dude*-use community around people who use *dude* in a fun way rather than as an example of the Magic *E* rule.

At present we have seen that there are two models of conduct in play at the same time. The traditional model, in which *dude* simply exemplifies the Magic *E* rule, and the modern model, in which a student metapragmatically invokes other uses of *dude*. Which of these two models is sustained over time? Will traditional or contemporary metadiscourses prevail? A month later, it appears both models of conduct are still in play (as characterized in the box at the bottom of Figure 1):

**Example 7: Sustaining Traditional and Improvisational Models of Conduct**

3/17/00 – Hey dude

((*Rolando picks a card from the Phonics Game and reads it*))

|          |                |   |  |
|----------|----------------|---|--|
| Rolando: | Dude.          | } | <i>metaphonetic activity (traditional)</i> |
| Teacher: | Ye:s.          | } |  |
| Jose:    | Hey du:de. (.) | } | <i>metapragmatic</i>                       |
|          | How you doin?  | } | <i>activity (contemporary)</i>             |

This example shows the same students playing the Phonics game a month later, when the *dude* card was drawn again. As you can see, both the traditional genre of metaphonetic commentary and the modern genre of metapragmatic *dude* use are in play. Moreover, a new student, Jose, is using *Dude* now in a manner functionally similar to the way Rene invoked it a month ago. Both models—the traditional and the contemporary—seem to be sticking. Moreover, over the course of the semester, I noticed the prevalence of this style of word play as it proliferated, not only around the word *dude*, but also around many other cards in the phonics game. As Table 3, below, illustrates, this form of word play was sustained—and arguably increased—over time. Still, it did not overwhelm the traditional functions of the Phonics game.

**Table 3: Word Play During the Phonics Game**

|   | 2/11        | 2/23                  | 3/17               | 3/27       | 3/28   | 4/19  | 4/26 |
|---|-------------|-----------------------|--------------------|------------|--------|---|------|
| <b>Words that were read, then played on</b> | <b>Dude</b> | Reel<br>Fleet<br>Heel | <b>Dude</b><br>Lie | Shy<br>Why | Chancy | Rat<br>Rob<br>Wig<br>Witch<br>Not<br>Green<br>-bean | Lucy |
| Total                                       | 1           | 3                     | 2                  | 2          | 1      | 6   | 1    |

The following examples illustrate the playful trajectory of another word, “Chancy.”

Below, Rene has chosen a card that has the word *chancy* written on it. As it turns out, *chancy* is both an adjective and the name of a Pokemon character:

**Example 8: From Phonics™ to Pokemon™**

3-28-00

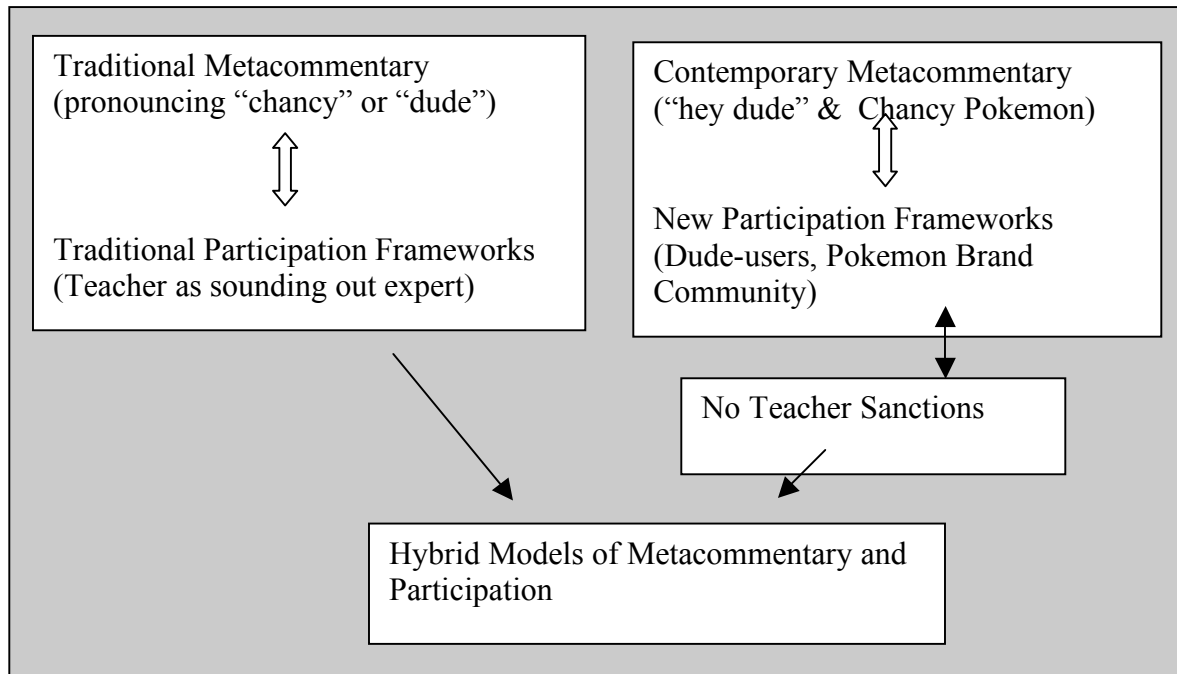
|                 |  |   |   |                              |
|-----------------|--|---|---|------------------------------|
| <b>Teacher:</b> | <b>Cha:n (.) –c- -y-.</b>                                  | } | } | <i>metaphonetic activity</i> |
|                 | (2.0)  |   |   |                              |
| <b>Rene:</b>    | <b>Chances.</b>  | } | } | <i>metaphonetic activity</i> |
| <b>Teacher:</b> | <b>Cha:n::c:y.</b>   |   |   |                              |
| <b>Rene:</b>    | <b>Chancy.</b>   | } | } | <i>metaphonetic activity</i> |
| Rene:           | Ohp<br>((looking at Dante and smiling))<br>[Pokemon.       |   |   |                              |
| Dante:          | [It’s a Pokemon.   | } | } | <i>metapragmatic play</i>    |
| <b>Teacher:</b> | <b>And you have to tell me<br/>[why the –a- is sho:rt.</b> |   |   |                              |
| Dante:          | [Chansey. (.) I got it.                                    | } | } | <i>metapragmatic play</i>    |

In this example, I have bolded the traditional, metaphonetic activity, and left the metapragmatic activity in plain type. As you can see, both the traditional metaphonetic activity and the playful metapragmatic activity genres are maintained. Rene and Dante dramatically invoke the Pokemon fan brand community and the associated student-centered participation framework. At the same time, however, they continue to respond to the teacher’s metaphonetic queries in the traditional teacher-centered participation framework.

Over time, in this ESL pullout group, hybrid models of metacommentary developed such that multiple genres of metacommentary and participation were in play at the same time. This model (see Figure 2) displays a new perspective on language socialization in classrooms, in which students are simultaneously socialized into multiple models of conduct.



**Figure 2: Phonics Game Play: Mixing traditional and modern metacommentary (with examples)**



**A Youth-Dominated Media Coup?:  
Recirculating Metadiscourses By Kids and For Kids**

Certainly there are infinite possible circulating communicative repertoires on which students and teachers draw. So far, this paper has distinguished just two, which I have called “traditional” and “contemporary.” The traditional communicative repertoires are characterized by metadiscourses that feature teacher knowledge and participation frameworks that are teacher centered. The contemporary communicative repertoires are characterized by metadiscourses that foment creativity, play and rebellion, and participation frameworks that involve peers and even peer-identified brand communities like “pokemon fans.” In the phonics examples, these two modes of activity—traditional and contemporary—have been shown to co-exist as students learn the ropes of each model of conduct simultaneously—both how to sound out for the teacher and how to vamp off the words like *dude* or *chancy* and find humor or common ground in those words as they dutifully pronounce them for the teacher.

But what happens after students leave these classrooms? How are these genres of metacommentary sustained outside Rampton’s Central High, an LA current events session, or a semester of Phonics lessons in Georgia? What are the continued life trajectories for these models of conduct? These questions bring us back to the mass-media—which in turn re-circulates contemporary stories about schools and what goes on in them. This recirculation of communicative repertoires forges new links between mass

media and schooling through stories that are told *about* schooling. Through this recirculation step illustrates qualitative differences between how recently developed mass-media how traditional mass media re-circulate types of metacommentary about schooling. I provide three examples that illustrate this difference below, but any quick glance at the internet or the TV will provide many more to even the most casual observer.

### *School Stories: Harry Potter and its Metacommentators*

Mass-mediated versions of stories about schooling are not a new phenomenon. Agha (2002) has written, for example, about widely circulating 19<sup>th</sup> c. British school stories—fictionalized accounts of British public school education—that recirculated genres of conduct within public schooling in the form of popular fiction. These fictional representations of classroom life circulated widely, but the metacommentary on these stories existed exclusively as kids’ face-to-face conversation and, unlike the school stories themselves, had very limited circulation (no U-tube or blogging in those days!). The contemporary school story, in contrast, is not only available in book form, in novels like Harry Potter, but also in stories about conduct in classrooms as told through TV shows, movies and on websites. These are more widely and rapidly circulating than the 19<sup>th</sup> c. school stories. And, more significantly, metacommentary about these stories is not limited to kids’ face-to-face conversations. Now, through blogs and metacultural websites like U-Tube, kids’ metacommentary also has become mass-mediated and linked to consumer culture.

Harry Potter Novels are the prime example of such a contemporary school story. These offer up representations of school life in a widely-circulating, fantasy fiction medium. The Harry Potter books have the largest circulation of any novel in English since the Agatha Christie mysteries, but even more significantly, these stories have spawned countless forms of mass-mediated, kid-dominated metacommentary, including, Harry Potter websites. Now, Metacommentary on Harry Potter representations constitutes a new form of mass culture created entirely by kids—like fan-fictions written by kids who draw on Harry Potter characters but make new adventures for them. These fan-fictions in turn spawn another layer of meta-commentary by critics who respond to them on line. So, Kids’ Metacommentary is itself now a wide-circulation mass media form.

### *You Tube’s Zany Professor and its Metacommentaries*

YouTube also offers up widely and rapidly circulating models of what goes on in classrooms. Recently, a film called “Zany Professor” depicted a babbling, nonsensical professor at the University of Florida. People have been logging on, producing more widely circulating metacommentary on this schooling representation. Two commenters, for example, simply repeated a sentence, savoring, word for word, this segment of the professors “lecture:” “I love going to old churches.” Another comment metapragmatically savored the non-sequitur style of the Zany Professor, replicating the genre: “Adam Smith rocks! The Wealth of Nations is like totally um, um, I like nachos.” Both this video, and more importantly, the commentary about this video, circulate new

models about what goes on in classrooms and what possible genres of metacommentary surround these representations.

*Ned's Declassified School Survival Guide: Its own Metacommentary*

The popular Nickelodeon TV show, *Ned's Declassified School Survival Guide* merges the school story function with the metacommentary function. For those readers who haven't seen this show, a synopsis:

Ned Bigby has a dream. He not only wants to survive his middle school years, he wants to ENJOY them. So he's created the ultimate survival guide full of tips and tricks to conquer those mind-barfing, nerve-wracking and hideously embarrassing situations every sixth through eighth grader faces (Nickelodeon Website Show Summary).

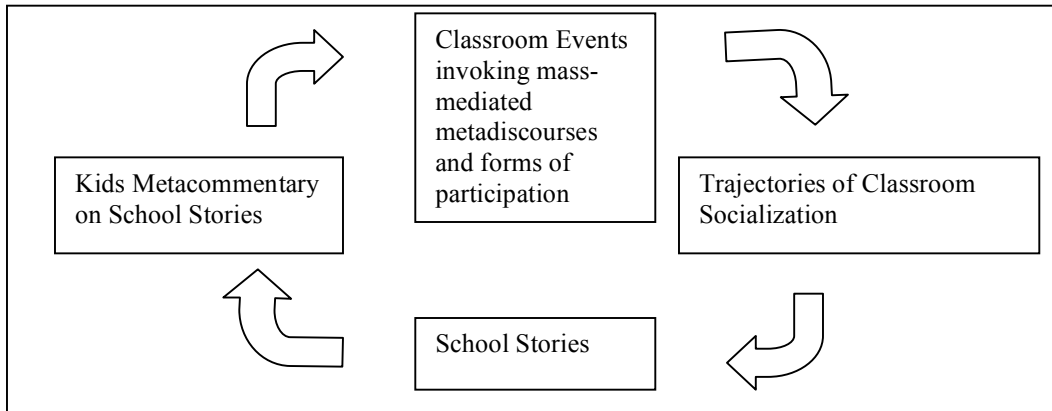
The show is both a representation of school life and a kids' metacommentary on it. During the show, eye-gaze shifts cue different participation frameworks, as Ned turns to the TV viewer to provide explanations or reactions to the live action at the school. However this show, while it attempts to capitalize on the "youth" perspective on schooling, is, unlike more raw and edgy Harry Potter Fan sites or U-Tube Comments, an adult-produced version of kids metacommentary. This suggests kids' metacommentary on school is now getting re-introduced into more official, adult versions of what goes on in schools.

As all three of these examples illustrate, mass-mediated models of conduct characterized by ironic, playful or critical genres of metacommentary and new forms of participation are circulated in small scale classroom interactions characterized by a hybrid of traditional and contemporary genres of metacommentary, forms of participation and sources of expertise. Versions of these forms of classroom experience are then in turn re-circulated through large scale interactional trajectories (like web or TV-circulated "school stories" I've just shown examples of). Kids' metacommentary then develops in response to these stories. While mass mediated school stories been around for a long time, the mass mediated and widely circulated genre of kids' metacommentary is wholly new. Kids metacommentaries are now (at least) as widely circulating as other forms of metacommentary on schooling (like teacher education materials). So, kids' notions—and notions that are also highly linked to consumer culture—have grown exponentially as an influence on school culture in contemporary times.

While I have not illustrated in this paper how these metacommentaries are then again re-taken up in classroom discourse, I believe I have begun to illustrate how this cycle of metacommentary may be bringing about the qualitative changes in classroom discourse Rampton (2006) discusses and which I have further documented in the previous sections. As illustrated in Figure 3, below, I began by specifically illustrating (Box 1) how classroom events enact widely circulating contemporary communicative repertoires, like metapragmatic commentary. Then, I illustrated how these models became routine in a phonics lesson over time (Box 2). Next, I discussed how school stories about discourse in schools also seem to represent this kind of playful

metadiscourse (Box 3) and how mass-distributed kids’ commentary on those school stories spreads this model of playful school metadiscourse even further and wider (Box 4). While I have not explicitly illustrated how these metacommentaries are then reintroduced back into classroom events (Box 1), I hope I have made the cycle clear. It is my hope that this initial foray provides a model for further empirical investigation into mass media and the communicative repertoires in play in contemporary classroom discourse.

**Figure 3: Full Circle: Mass Media’s Relationship to Classroom Discourse**



**Conclusion and Implications: Mass Media and Schooling**

Mass-mediated meta-discourses have been around for a long time. However, the emergence of a vast quantity of mass-mediated metacommentary on schools generated by kids themselves is new. This prevalence of kid-created metacommentary is re-shaping, possibly on a grand scale, the normative, small-scale participation frameworks in today’s classrooms. This new understanding of mass-mediated metadiscourses and their effects on participation frameworks can begin to change the way we approach research on classroom conduct, including discourse among English language learners and their teachers.

We can think of classroom conduct now as not hermetically sealed or determined by pre-packaged curricula or policy mandates. Students’ identities and actions are not unilaterally determined by policy definitions like “English Language Learner” or “highly Qualified Teacher” or by presumptions about students projected by teachers’ professional development or top-down mandates. Instead, through widely circulating, mass-mediated metadiscourses, many of them kid-created and influenced by consumer culture, students are already active consumers and producers of classroom content. With these new metadiscourses come changing forms of participation. Students are masters at navigating and creating new cultural borders—but these borders may not be between nation states or between home and school or between the typical race, class, and gender demographics.

Students create borders around brand loyalties (like Pokemon or James Brown), or register recognitions (like “hey dude!”), or even, as Rampton (2006) has shown, through foreign languages, like “mock German.” In other words, students are not socialized into a single “school discourse,” but learn to navigate multiple models of conduct.

This more contemporary perspective on classroom discourse can also change the way we think about English Language Learners. Instead of expecting multilingual students to passively submit to a prescribed role like “English Language Learner”, we may find additional language learners using multilingualism (and register range, as I’ve shown in the phonics examples) as a resource for metacommentary and a tool for changing how they get to participate in class. From a contemporary perspective, additional languages and registers and ways of speaking are not pre-judged as emblems of foreignness, hillbilly-ness, or ignorance, but as raw material to be used to enact certain demeanors, or to form new social groupings.

This new perspective on mass-mediated metadiscourses also has implications for how we think about the people who are teaching in schools. There has been a lot of talk, for example, about diversifying the teacher work force. And there has been research suggesting that when teachers are ethnically or racially the “same” as their students, their students will do better. But in my work with new bilingual teachers, I’ve found that the resource these teachers bring with them is not some generic cultural “Latino sameness,” but rather recognition of the productivity of their native language as a distinctively contemporary asset (Cahnmann, Rymes, & Souto-Manning, 2005; Rymes, Cahnmann, & Souto-Manning, in press). These teachers connect with each other and to students because they know a similar meta-narrative of difference—and because they are aware of their own vast register range, including a range of language choices like Spanish or English—and how they can use their multilingualism institutionally to form new participation frameworks with students, peers, and parents.

I see a need for more research examining the intersection between mass-mediated demeanors and multilingual populations and how these variables affect both circulating metadiscourses and changing participation in classroom discourse. We need to understand not simply how students do on achievement tests, but how they participate in class, what “media” they draw on for that participation, and how those forms of participation are related to discourse in the world at large. I also have ideas for how this research might proceed. We need to build an empirical record of the communicative repertoires students bring to the classroom, the classroom effects of those repertoires over time, and how those repertoires are relevant to circulating discourse outside the classroom. This work should have implications for how we teach in increasingly multilingual and mass-mediated classrooms and for creating meaningful, context-relevant, forward-looking teacher education.

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