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Communities of Practice Found in Unlikely Places: The Backseat Posse

If the argument soon to be laid out were to materialize as a reenactment of a Community of Practice (CofP), not in defense of one, there'd be no introductory preambles, pleasantries would be forgone, and in quick succession you, reader, would be immersed in a web of foreign and unintelligible habits. Now, if for some reason you were to have a relevant knowledge of the cultural habits of Bermudian high school students, the chances of you deeming such a situation as rude, slightly disorienting and above all bizarre, would decrease. Maybe your ability to decode the doings of this group would even set you in alignment with this make-believe CofP, but that's as close as you'd get to identifying among them, still loitering in the margins. This hypothetical group of Bermudian teenagers, this CofP, was in fact very real: we had our joint enterprise, we were mutually engaged, and we had a shared repertoire, but most significant to us, was the fact that we had a backseat, because we were The Backseat Posse.

We were four individuals across two grades whose commonality was arriving at school ridiculously early and whose other other commonality was doing so before everyone else. That was the substance of what made us feel exceptional, as though we were the custodians of the place that governed our daily behavior. There was a subversiveness in our being early which comprised our joint enterprise. Beyond seeking the refuge we found in friendship, on a school premises where our natural behavior was stifled, during those early hours we got to set the rules, and thus our “community” was this “product of sustained

interaction” that ultimately emerged through shared practices of napping, speaking in dialect, listening to music, and sitting every day in the same position for three consecutive years (King, 2019). Much of our shared understanding derived from an absent expectation to share more than what was relevant to the direct context we were situated in, so we wouldn’t divulge our personal lives, but we’d talk routinely about how tired we were, what homework we hadn’t managed to do the night before, which car would be the second earliest, etc. There wasn’t a pressure for us to overshare because we all knew that we, through time, tailored the backseat to be a safe place for our very localized practices; and we also had an implicit understanding of each other’s family lives which were incredibly sensitive and a large part of the reason that we all arrived at school at the times we did. To clarify, two of the members, my sister and I, were children of our mother who worked at the school and that’s why we had access to a car; the other two commuted separately, so for them there was arguably more “buy-in” to our CofP.

Over the three years that we spent together in the backseat, the core members didn’t fluctuate, however there was a periphery roster which was variable. The almost-early friends of ours who would flock to the car when they didn’t know what else to do with the extra twenty minutes they had before class started. The song would change when these friends entered our sphere but only momentarily. We’d offer up introductory preambles but then we’d quickly resume our CofP, mobilizing our inside jokes and reupholstering the walls with the fabric of our community. Nobody was alienated, again these “extra” additions were our friends, but they were in the car by happenstance and they hadn’t been a part of the negotiations that set the community in motion (King, 2019). One of the most significant distinctions between us core members and those on the periphery was simply that they didn’t have a seat in the car. It was a subtle spatial distinction, so when new people arrived it was clear who belonged and who didn’t, and they’d usually make a predictable joke about the

awkwardness of occupying the driver's seat because they were afraid our mother would come back to the car. We were all grateful for the space that our mother provided which eventually developed into a banter between the four of us and her about the absurdity of living in the car for two hours before school. This understanding proved exclusive and binding enough to confer legitimate peripheral membership to our mother.

Humor was a defining feature of our CofP's shared repertoire, and it was spearheaded by one particular member who sat in the passenger seat. He was the architect of our inside-jokes. Much of the language we assimilated into originated from his perception of the practice. One additional feature of our shared repertoire was the way we immersed ourselves in Bermudian English. We abused the beauty of its shorthand, reveling in the possibility of *our* language and the way it served as resistance in the predominantly white setting of our school. We also communicated through music and created a default playlist of sorts that couldn't be tampered with, a strict prohibition on 'periphery' songs.

If such a scenario at the beginning of this argument felt abstract, hopefully through these pieces of evidence you can grasp the legitimacy of The Backseat Posse's CofP status. Eight years on, we still find ourselves laughing just as hard as we did in the backseat, bonded by a community we never intended to create.

Bibliography

King, Brian W. 2019. *Communities of Practice in Applied Language Research*.