
Don't Panic: A Hitchhiker's Guide to My Literacy

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White bleached walls—that was the first thing I saw as I stepped into my room. Walls scrubbed clean of Sharpied poems, lyrics, and quotes; walls which were completely void of my Crayola stick figures, Woodstock posters, maps, and pictures of completely everything and absolutely nothing. There were no more clothes on the floor, old locks hanging from my curtains, or messages scribbled here and there from all of the people who had passed through my room and my life. I wonder if Malcolm X ever meant his phrase “bleached history” to be taken literally (356)? Despite that all of this had been taking place, and even when I was forced to take down everything from my walls, or when the painters came in, or when I came home to find my bed had been taken, I still had not realized *that* room was no longer *my* room until I had to pack away the last of my belongings into boxes for storage. Out of the thousands of books I had read, the relatively small amount I could keep was now packed into two neat rows, each stacked three boxes high.

As I was packing I looked up above my door, where a sign used to read, “Don't Panic.” I thought—quite dramatically, if I might add—that a more fitting sign would probably have been, “Abandon all hope ye who enter here.” My door swung open and the smile quickly dropped from my lips as my mom entered the room in a hurry. “There is no way you are keeping *another* box of books,” she said. The words escaped from her lips with her breath as she dropped a box on the floor: “We do not have room for any more of your junk.” I had a decision to make. I could sit here and argue that my stuff was not junk, or I could stay quiet and live to fight another day. Silence prevailing, my mom arched her eyebrows in a way that said, “Get rid of it,” before she hurried back out.

I went over to the opened box she'd dropped off and took a look inside. She must have been dreaming. Did she really believe I could ever have gotten rid of *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* or the entire Harry Potter series? How could I possibly give up my *National Forensics League Rule Book*, *The Art of War*, or any of the countless treasures I had hidden inside? She had to understand, it wasn't possible. How is it that she could only see junk where I saw my entire life story?

Lucas Pasqualin and the Sorcerer's Stone

By the time I was in the first grade, I was lugging around books that were almost too heavy for me to lift. Writer Sherman Alexie described my predicament exactly: “[I] read books at recess, then during lunch, and in the minutes left after I had finished my classroom assignments” (365). Out of all the hundreds of books I've read, I can say with confidence that I really wouldn't be the same person I am today without J.K. Rowling.

The story goes that, at a time when I was just developing my literacy, my sister began to read me a story. Definitely not just any bedtime story, the over three hundred-page *Sorcerer's Stone* was teased and spoon-fed to me in bite-sized pieces. Poor Amanda. It wasn't until much later that I discovered she was just trying to get me to fall asleep. She couldn't have made a bigger mistake.

When the time came that I finally couldn't take the anticipation any longer, I decided to pick up the book myself and struggle my way through. I can remember reading that book until once again, just like Sherman Alexie, "I could barely keep my eyes open" (365).

Even though they might not have known it, Amanda and J.K. Rowling served as perfect examples of Deborah Brandt's theory about literacy sponsors. While they gave me my initial hunger for reading, perhaps a more important sponsor would be the person who literally made it all possible—my mother. I arrived in the United States from Brazil not knowing a word of English, so as you can imagine I was quite surprised when I was placed in classrooms in the United States and expected to read. Granted, most students in those early years were just getting a grasp on language, but the expectations put on me at that time had implications that lasted well into my life. I don't remember exactly what I did, but what I do remember is the general sense of being the "stupid kid." I wasn't expected to know how to read, so I just shuffled through the school system not really gaining any knowledge. I specifically remember times when the teachers would talk about me right in front of my face. Someone should have mentioned how close "idiot" is to "idiota."

As tragic as that may sound, my story would completely change when I got home from school. When I was home, I was expected to be smart; I was expected not to complain, and most of all I was expected to be equal parts *Abduch* (my middle name as well as my mother's family's name) and *Pasqualin*, which to my family meant never giving up. I was on the verge of failing in school until my mother took time off her busy schedule to help me study. I remember she would set up these wild games involving crazy chases through the house just to match a picture to the correct spelling of a word. While I did not realize it at the time, these games and her attention are probably the reasons why I took to reading as quickly as I did. While my actual love affair with reading and writing did not start until much later, I'd be lying if I said I didn't love the looks on the faces of the other kids when they saw me reading books they couldn't dream of understanding. But what spurred me on even more than that was ultimately the pride I could hear in my mother's voice when she chided me about reading so much. Forever and always I will think of my mother as Professor McGonagall. My mother is tough as rocks, but also incredibly loving and caring. She is someone who will always be regarded as my strongest literacy sponsor, even if she did want me to throw away all my stuff.

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The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

While I have said before it would be hard to single out a book as my favorite, Douglas Adam's *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* definitely would not miss the mark by much. To understand just exactly what this book means to me you need some background knowledge of what I was going through at the time I picked it up. While there really is no short and sweet version—I was a melodramatic teenager—let's just say I was in a position where I felt depressed and alone in a world that no longer made sense to me. My parents were on the verge of a divorce, my brother was on the edge of being deported, and our entire family was about to go bankrupt. And, just to top it all off, my best friend had moved to another country, and it seemed like all my other friends had deserted me right as I was coming of age.

I felt like the two old women in *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Sitting on a bench by the Pacific, one turns to the other and complains that she thought it would be bigger. I could relate in that I felt growing up was certainly not all that it had been built up to be. But, then again, I could relate anything in my life to that book. In fact my motto—the same motto written on the cover of

any copy of *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*—is “Don't Panic.” I learned from Douglas Adams that, while I didn't understand why my brother continued to get into trouble, or why my parents didn't want to be together anymore, or why it seemed I was left alone, it was all okay; things didn't always need to make sense.

If J.K. Rowling gave me a hunger for reading, Adams is who made me respect literacy as a force to be reckoned with. After all, it took Malcolm X from behind bars and turned him into the leader of a movement. It took a poor Indian child from a reservation and turned him into Sherman Alexie—winner of the World Heavyweight Poetry Bout, writer of screenplays, and much more. And it turned out to also be the vehicle of my escape.

Busboy

My family's financial situation wasn't really getting better over time, and my curiosity was growing almost as fast as my list of extracurricular activities, so by the time I graduated high school I was definitely well-versed in several different multiliteracies. Mirabelli would have a field day researching my experiences.

For example, the first job I held was busing tables, so I was totally astonished to read in Mirabelli's article, “Learning to Serve: The Language and Literacy of Food Service Workers,” that the National Skills Labor Board had labeled waiting tables as a “low skilled profession” (540). As young as I was at the time (around fifteen-years-old), there was still a host of definitions, protocols, and norms I had to learn. Just as Mirabelli described in his article, I experienced firsthand that answering a question most of the time did not only require knowledge of what words meant on the menu, but also of the specific process my restaurant used in making the food they served. Likewise, since a big portion of my job included getting drink orders, knowing the distinctions between wines and what they meant was essential to my job experience.

One thing Mirabelli did not mention was the role physical communication plays in the service industry. People do not like being pestered while they eat and they do not want to be watched, yet they want their own private appetites fulfilled without having to ask. As a busboy, I found it was important I not only understood technical knowledge about the food and wine, but it was just as important that I had a really keen eye and an acute understanding of body language. It takes practice to know the numerous signals people use to communicate they're ready for their check, they are finished with their plates, or they would like to order desert.

Pet Detective

Another way I became multiliterate was by working as a sales associate for Pet Supermarket. You'd be surprised just how much discourse goes on between sales associates and customers. Similar to food service, at Pet Supermarket there were also two parts to that literacy: first, the technical knowledge, and, second, the knowledge about the customers. Just in the fish department alone, for example, it was necessary to know words like PH, ammonia, nitrates, cichlids, and gobies. And while these words are more objective in their meaning, there is an entire process that goes into pinpointing your customers' problems, and then actually convincing them you can fix them. Mirabelli wrote of a waiter who when questioned about the menu, “would make it sound so elaborate that they would just leave it up to [him]...” (546). While I was always trying to help my customers, the best strategy sometimes involved doing the same thing. Just as the waiter used his superiority in the restaurant literacy to control the flow of the conversation, I would use my pet store literacy to convince customers I knew what I was talking about.

While working as a busboy the most I would talk to someone was maybe a couple of minutes. However, a big sale at Pet Supermarket could literally go on and on for days. I knew it was pertinent in retail to know how to spot a customer who has needs you can fill, instead of one just

looking for a petting zoo. And even then I would still have to discern how much they wanted to pay and what products they needed. If someone was very adamant about a pet, and, for example, referred to pets like children, then most likely that individual would end up wanting the security of having paid a higher price for pet products. I also learned how to tell if customers were ready to buy something just by the physical contact they had with the product.

The Debate Team and the Art of War

Ah, debate. Like modern day linguistic gladiator fights. This is where literacies come to battle it out and, in some cases, even die. I joined the debate team really early in my high school career, and if I had not held a wide range of multiliteracies by then, I would have developed them at that time. Obviously, I needed very clear communication skills just to be able to compete. The ability to write ten minute speeches, or, for that matter, even four minute speeches, is not something everyone possesses. But the intricacies, the “kill words,” the strategies that would upstage Sun Tzu—it is in those skills where the real literacy of debate lies. While there is no instruction manual on winning a debate, doing so requires a very clear understanding of what your judges wants to hear, what your adversary is actually communicating (and not just what he wants to communicate), and much, much more.

“Always” (just to name one from the dozens) was a kill word. Since it's not often something is “always” true, using that word by accident or on purpose usually meant that an adversary could “kill” you on that claim. But that’s just where it starts. Sometimes people would bait others with kill

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words just to pull attention from other weaker claims they were using. Or better yet, cite untrustworthy sources just so their opponents could waste the rest of the remaining time citing the dozens they had to back them up. Mirabelli speaks about the struggle for control in the interactions between waiter and customer. As can be seen, this struggle for control is manifested in the debate world in a much more tangible way. Hand signals, changes in pitch, even moments of silence are all used to gain control of the debate, just as a soccer player fights for control of a ball.

The best debaters were also literate in the signals someone made when they were bluffing on a claim, or better yet when they were about to break down. Losing your cool in a debate, screaming, or using language that was a little too passionate usually resulted in that person losing. One important strategy in any debate is spotting a weak point and then striking that weak point until your opponent is frantic, all the while making sure it still appears you are amicable to the judge. Being literate in this kind of knowledge actually prepared me for watching the presidential debates. I knew exactly what Biden was doing when he was laughing at Paul Ryan's arguments. When Obama stayed quiet while Romney was arguing with him, I knew he was just baiting him to look foolish. On a much larger scale, the literacy of the private struggle for power in communication has also allowed me to spot those kinds of situations in my own life.

A lot of what I learned from debate has also gone into my writing. When I was writing claims for debate, I had to have all these strategic elements in mind. Not supporting any one claim was a failure of biblical proportions, a failure that would undoubtedly crucify me in front of the judges. It was that serious. Now, whenever I write, there is always a little voice inside my head asking for evidence, checking for loopholes in my arguments, and really just being a general nuisance.

Don't Panic

Sitting alone in my room and looking through that box of books, it was crazy to think about just how much reading had positively impacted my life. I'm curious to know if other people have had the same kind of experiences as me. What kind of impact does not just reading but also developing many different kinds of multiliteracies actually have on people long-term? It would be interesting to study whether there is a correlation between developing various multiliteracies early in childhood and success later in life, just as I believe there has been in my life. Would my grades have been the same without all of my sponsors? Would I still have been accepted to UCF without the many literacies I have acquired? Would I still have been that same kid, sitting in my room alone and scared as all hell of leaving home?

What life and literacy have shown me so far is that you can't abandon hope. I've learned that the world can be a very confusing place, especially if you're not versed in all of its literacies. I've also learned to keep that in mind, and when life throws me in a new direction, I try to embrace that. Life and literacy have taught me that when your walls are painted blank, you should let them represent a new page in your life. When it's three a.m., and you've been stuck on the same sentence for the past three hours, and your paper is due in the morning, you can't abandon hope. And when your adversaries drive you into a corner, when you feel like everyone around you is speaking a foreign language, when everything is going wrong, and especially when you're going to a new place with sure to be alien literacies, I've learned the best thing you can do is to take it all in, remember to pick up your towel, and never, never ever forget that motto—don't panic.

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Lucas Pasqualin is a freshman at the University of Central Florida. Born in Sao Paulo, Brazil, he moved to South Florida at a very early age. Currently majoring in computer engineering, Lucas hopes to one day create products and applications that make everyone's life a little bit easier. While Lucas does miss his family and friends back home, he is adapting very nicely to life in college, and is quickly learning to love his new life as a Knight.