

Use a Text as a Theory Source (student sample)

Purpose: To practice using a text as a theory source; to appreciate how a theory source can deepen and complicate the analysis

Task: Read this paragraph from a former student which builds upon an argument source and uses a theory source to deepen and complicate the analysis of an exhibit source

Exhibit source: Frederick Wiseman's documentary *High School*

Argument source: "Power in the high school extends beyond discipline and punishment" (Thomas Benson and Carolyn Anderson 111).

Theory source: Excerpt from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's novel *Emile*

Critics Thomas Benson and Carolyn Anderson claim that "power in the high school extends beyond discipline and punishment" (111); indeed, much of this subversive power originates in language, as the first classroom scene establishes. In this scene, a homeroom teacher reads the daily bulletin, and the camera zooms to extreme close-ups of his mouth—emphasizing this body part as an instrument of control—as he reads the school bulletin. Ironically, the bulletin's "thought for the day" promises students that they have control over their own lives. The teacher reads, "Class, here's the 'thought for the day': One creates his tomorrow at every moment by his motives, thoughts, and deeds of today." The one-sided nature of this conversation, however—the teacher talks, the students listen passively—demonstrates how this potentially empowering statement is instead damaging. To develop a truly educated student, according to philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *Emile*, the teacher should "put the questions within his [student's] reach and leave them to him to resolve" (391). Yet the teacher in this scene offers students no opportunity to "resolve" anything, which Wiseman emphasizes by zooming in on his moving mouth while brief cutaways to the students show them to be listless, their heads propped up by a hand. The teacher appears to be celebrating the intellectual freedom and opportunities of his students, but his words exist only to convince students that they have control over their own thinking, turning them into what Rousseau would call "mere plaything[s] of other people's thoughts" (393). This scene is the first to establish the authority of the school's teachers and administration, an authority so successful that students do not register their subjugation.