Cultural-Historical Approaches to Literacy Teaching and Learning

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I n this chapter, we discuss the contribution of a cultural-historical approach to literacy in designing productive learning environments for all students. We believe that a cultural-historical approach to learning and development is a particularly robust theory, as it focuses on the relation between an individual's development and the contexts of development of which the individual student has been a part. From this perspective, to understand a student's literacy practices, we would want to know as much as we could about the student's history of involvement in literacy practices across all the contexts of his or her everyday life. For example, bilingual children of immigrant parents often serve as translators for their parents across a range of institutional practices, including medical, educational, and business transactions. These same children might also participate in religious, social, cultural, and political activities that involve various language and literacy practices. These children also participate in schooling activities.

Taken together, participating in these practices provides opportunities for children to develop a literacy toolkit with resources that can help them navigate the intercultural exchanges of everyday life. We refer to the toolkit acquired by a person's history of involvement in practices as their "repertoires of practice" (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). In other words, the concept of repertoires of practice refers to people's ways of engaging in activities stemming from their participation in a range of cultural practices. This perspective requires attention to people's history of engagement in practices of the cultural community of which they are a part. We attribute cultural differences, then, to variations in people's involvement in the common practices of particular cultural communities.

In the classroom, a focus on students' repertoires of practice helps us understand better what students know and also moves us away from deficit explanations of students' performances in which students' differences in language and literacy practices are attributed to students' membership in particular cultural communities. By *cultural community*, we mean a group of people who share a history of some traditions and understandings in common, extending across several generations. Further, a cultural-historical approach assumes that individual development and

disposition must be understood in (and not separate from) cultural and historical contexts, which are always embedded in social-political relations and struggles. In other words, we talk about patterns of students' approaches to given situations without reducing the explanation to a claim that they do what they do because they are immigrants or English-language learners (ELL), for example. This cultural-historical view advances a dynamic notion of culture in which culture is not equated with categories of race and ethnicity, a common but unfortunate tendency among educators and practitioners.

In educational contexts, conflating race and ethnicity with culture can lead to stereotypical or essentialist notions about communities and their members. As we have written previously (Gutiérrez & Correa-Chavez, 2006; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003), reductive or narrow notions of culture can result in making assumptions about students' learning potential based social categories such as race and ethnicity or attributing a "cultural learning style" to students on the same basis. Instead, educators should focus on understanding the relation of individual learning and the practices of the students' cultural community. The challenge for educators is to reexamine their working notions of culture, how their views influence the ways learning is organized in their classrooms, and whether extant views of culture lead to viewing cultural differences as deficits.

The Role of Culture in Learning and Development

Understanding the role of culture in learning requires understanding what is actually "cultural" about students' learning. For this reason, the focus of this chapter centers on culture and the mediating role it assumes in human activity. A cultural-historical theoretical approach to learning and development is particularly useful here, as it is the only theory of learning and development in which culture is not treated as a variable; rather, culture is central to this view of learning and human development in which culture is said to mediate human activity. From a cultural-historical perspective, human beings interact with their worlds primarily through mediational means, such as cultural artifacts, tools, signs, and symbols (including language). Instead of conceiving of culture as a totalizing concept, it is more useful to think about culture as that which mediates an individual's relation to the social world, as depicted in Figure 5.1.

In this way, culture is indexed in our everyday practices—as Moll (1990) has said, the way we live *culturally. Culture* is also defined as our social inheritance, as we are born into a world that is filled with tools (also known as artifacts) designed by previous generations to help facilitate everyday life. As Cole (1996) notes,

> Culture . . . can be understood as the entire pool of artifacts accumulated by the social group in the course of its historical experience. In the aggregate, the accumulated artifacts of a group—culture—is then seen as the species-specific *medium* of human development. It is "history in the present." The capacity to develop within that medium and to arrange for its reproduction in succeeding generations is *the* distinctive characteristic of our species. (p. 110, emphasis in original)

Figure 5.1. Cultural Mediation of the Social World
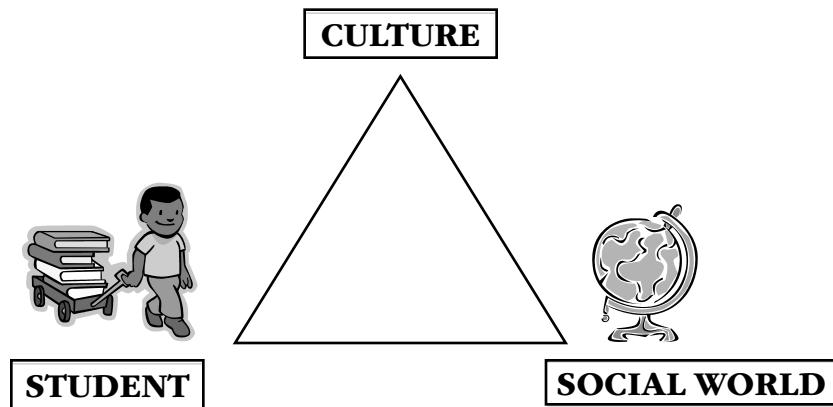
We are all implicated in dynamic cultural processes, as we organize our lives around particular material tools (such as alarm clocks) and social constructions (such as notions of time) that we did not necessarily create but are, in essence, "borrowing" from previous generations and in many ways, "lending" to future generations. Moreover, according to Cole (1996), the organizing principle of the cultural-historical school of thought is "that the structure and development of human psychological processes emerge through culturally mediated, historically developing, practical activity" (p. 108). Through the processes of enculturation or socialization, human beings organize life for new and future generations to rediscover and appropriate mediating artifacts.

Over time, human beings accumulate, use or reject, and transform the various tools or resources available to us. These cultural tools and artifacts include both material artifacts—such as computers, pens, books, and recipes—and ideational artifacts—such as theories, ideologies, belief systems, and the like. Institutions, including schools and households, for example, are artificially organized settings in that they are far from "natural"; rather, our institutions are culturally constructed, historical in origin, and social in context. Of course, because generations before us have created these artifacts for us, we can begin to understand how culture can be considered to be both enabling and constraining.

Cultural artifacts can facilitate or mediate our existence in the social world, but they can also enhance or limit the ways we accomplish everyday tasks with others. Imagine what everyday life for many people would be like without a computer, television, microwave oven, telephone, or cellular phone. We know, for example, that computers have changed people's writing processes and that the Internet has enhanced access to information previously unavailable or difficult to access in a reasonable amount of time. However, although technology has enhanced the ways we communicate, electronic mail (or e-mail) in particular contexts has become constraining, as its abundance has radically altered the way we work, oftentimes demanding substantial portions of our work day designated for other tasks.

Within cultural communities, participants have varied roles across practices, and continual change among participants as well as transformation in the community's practices means that individuals regularly acquire, develop, and expand their knowledges and capacities, or their repertoires of practice. Across culturally mediated practices, adults and children take up different roles that extend beyond the static view of children as learners or "novices" and adults as teachers or "experts." In everyday settings, such as doctors' offices or the local arcade, children—including students we perceive as underachieving, low-performing, "at-risk," and so on—employ a variety of language and literacy practices and regularly shift their participation as novices or experts. Educators and practitioners should recognize that all children engage in schooling activities with a history of participation in a broad range of language and literacy experiences that reflect their cultural communities. Too often, deficit views of students have ignored children's active participation in the social and cultural activities that characterize their everyday lives.

The *funds of knowledge* approach that Moll and his colleagues (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992) implemented has explicitly used students' participation in the social and cultural activities of their families and communities as a central construct for helping teachers and researchers rethink, and hence, redesign classroom literacy activities. Teachers and researchers documented the funds of knowledge—or the social and cultural resources—that households used to sustain their families. For example, teachers documented that households used and distributed their resources in agriculture and mining (e.g., knowledge of minerals), business economics (e.g., knowledge of building codes), household management (e.g., budgeting), material and scientific knowledge (e.g., construction, automobile repair), medicine (e.g., midwifery, folk veterinary cures), and religion (e.g., Bible studies). Teachers then worked collaboratively to design thematic curricula that built specifically on the social and cultural activities that mediated families' everyday lives, and in which their students had a history of ongoing participation.

Retheorizing Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum

Clearly, a cultural-historical theoretical perspective that emphasizes the everyday cultural practices in which school-aged children develop an expanded repertoire of languages and literacies can powerfully inform discussions about teaching, learning, and curriculum. This view of the role of culture in learning and development challenges us to rethink how we build on what our students already know in classroom teaching. Inherent to this discussion is a reframing of what it means to be a teacher: that is, to engage in new and alternative ways to use the knowledge and capacities of students implies new ways of learning about, from, and with our students. Although our current reform and accountability contexts perhaps limit alternative approaches to literacy curriculum, a cultural-historical view challenges us to learn from our students and to reorganize learning contexts that build strategically on the social, cultural, linguistic, and intellectual resources of the increasingly diverse students and families we serve.

The unfortunate reality is that more often than not, despite some grass-roots efforts across local and professional communities, learning is often socially and culturally organized to ignore the kinds of literacies students acquire and develop throughout their everyday lives. We believe contemporary testing apparatuses used to judge achievement, effectiveness, and success are narrowing ways that teachers approach literacy teaching and learning and institutionalizing reductive literacies that fail to prepare children for participation in—and potentially, for the social transformation of—increasingly complex, multimodal, and shifting globalscapes.

We use a series of classroom examples to help us illustrate how classrooms, too, are cultural communities organized through particular schedules, ways of talking, spatial arrangements, ways to accomplish tasks, and routines. Although classrooms are, of course, complex, consider for a moment the cultural practices we find almost exclusively in schools. Students line up, desks are arranged in rows or in groups, everyone eats and takes breaks at the same time, a teacher manages a majority of classroom activities, teachers engage in ongoing evaluation of students' talk and work, and classroom discourse is limited to immediate classroom tasks. We fail to recognize that a range of cultural practices exist in the classroom across our students' experiences, but that teachers and students also jointly construct and participate in the culture of the classroom (Gallego, Cole, & Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition [LCHC], 2001).

A cultural-historical perspective emphasizes that participation in cultural practices with others has consequences for individuals' learning and development. In other words, how students participate and engage in meaning-making activities depends largely on how adults and teachers socially and culturally organize those activities. Discourse patterns are one way to describe the social organization of talk in classrooms, and these discourses have implications for how students participate and perhaps contribute to meaning making. Although classrooms likely reflect a range of discourses across activities, researchers have documented that the Initiation-Response-Evaluation (or I-R-E) pattern reflects the overwhelming character of classroom talk wherein a teacher initiates (I) a question, a student or students respond (R), and the teacher evaluates (E) the response with an utterance such as "That's right!" (Mehan, 1979).

Obviously, classroom discourse is varied and complex, but there are nevertheless considerable consequences to the overwhelming use of I-R-E in learning contexts. These discourse patterns limit the potential for expanded ideas and understandings, as the teacher's evaluation of students' contributions ostensibly constrains opportunities for new and different modes of sense making. These patterns of interaction, however, also reveal assumptions about who possesses the knowledge that counts in classroom learning, how knowledge is constructed, and whose knowledge counts.

We have a history of examining these issues in various contexts—English-only and bilingual classrooms in low- and high-performing schools, after-school computer clubs, summer high school programs, and literacy coaching contexts. However, we believe classroom examples in particular best illustrate some cultural-historical theoretical constructs for a teaching audience who seeks to deepen its understanding of how the social-cultural organization of literacy practices

has consequences for students' literacy learning opportunities. These classroom examples show how talk, social interaction, roles, and the use of cultural tools and artifacts affect the kind of knowledge that is acquired and how students and teachers jointly contribute to meaning making—or how they are limited in this respect.

Cole and his colleagues (Cole, 1996; Cole & Griffin, 1983) have applied cultural-historical theoretical perspectives to a conceptualization of reading as "interpretation of the world" that emphasizes meaning making, rather than to "bottom-up" approaches oriented toward discrete reading skills and subskills. They acknowledge the social and cognitive processes involved in reading that in effect mediate humans' interpretations of the world. This mediation is accomplished through representations, the textual organization of graphic symbols (i.e., the alphabet), images, perceptions, ideas, concepts, and so on. For many practitioners, struggling readers in particular provoke calls for innovative methodologies that might help these students, many of whom include ELLs and students from low-income communities. For struggling readers especially, Cole and Griffin (1983) extend the notion of *re*-mediation. From their perspective, the organization of reading is a matter of *re*thinking, *re*arranging, *re*structuring, and *re*organizing the social systems that constitute reading practices rather than relying on *remedial*, skills-based instruction that rarely facilitates the kinds of reading we value across academic institutions. This view of reading, then, challenges us to *re*-mediate the social contexts that facilitate the teaching and learning of reading, instead of relying on reductive strategies and remedial approaches often used with struggling readers.

Exploring Reading "Discussion"

The following literacy event example illustrates how the social organization of reading discussion in this particular context facilitated one aspect of the "reading as interpretation of the world" process—vocabulary development—at the expense of expanded meaning-making. We documented this literacy event in a third-grade Spanish–English bilingual/transition classroom with mostly Latino/a ELLs in a "high-achieving" school, according to state measures. According to the district's bilingual program model, third-grade ELLs were "automatically" transitioned from mostly Spanish instruction with some English to English-only instruction in all content areas.

We use the classroom example that follows to illustrate three points. First, through the overwhelming use of the I-R-E discourse pattern, the teacher's cultural organization of discussions was oriented toward next-step learning strategies (Griffin & Cole, 1984), or assistance aimed at getting to the "next steps" involved in accomplishing the task—defining the words *trunk* and *attic*. Second, although we might agree that vocabulary expansion is productive in helping ELLs improve their reading comprehension abilities, this example shows how talk during whole-group reading discussions was ostensibly oriented toward vocabulary rather than sense making. In essence, the questions *were* the task; that is, the focus on vocabulary diminished opportunities for reading as interpretation of the world. Third, we hope to show how the teacher was nonetheless strategic about building on her students'

expanding lexicons, drawing on the text as a resource for obtaining the correct answers to her questions, and building on her students' cultural and experiential knowledge about trunks and attics.

The whole class sat in a large circle and participants held an English-language anthology in their laps, which they were reading aloud and in silence, regularly referencing the texts to participate in intermittent discussions facilitated by their teacher, Ms. Lucero (all research participants' names, except the researcher's, are pseudonyms). The students had just read a paragraph to themselves about a young girl who is rummaging through her grandmother's trunk, which is in her grandmother's attic. As was often the case, Ms. Lucero asked a simple recall question about the most recent paragraph. Though it was unclear why she focused on the words *trunk* and *attic*, it is possible she believed these words were unfamiliar to her ELLs.

Ms. Lucero:	And where did she get—she got some accessories or extra things to put on, like earrings and bracelets and necklaces? [motions toward her ears, wrist, and neck] Where did she get those from? Ramiro?
Ramiro:	In a trunk.
Ms. Lucero:	In a trunk. Now, what is a *trunk*? What is a trunk? I know about the elephant's trunk and the tree trunk and—Karina?
Karina:	Um, the back of a car.
Ms. Lucero:	The back of a car is part of a trunk. Uh-huh?
Salvador:	And it could be the attic?
Ms. Lucero:	Okay, that mentions that, something about the attic, doesn't it? Let's find that sentence. It's about the middle of it. Let's read that sentence together. It says, "The old bracelet—"
Students:	[reading out loud from their anthologies] "The old bracelet . . . in the attic jingled noisily . . ."
Ms. Lucero:	Stop right there. So she found them in a trunk in the attic. Okay, that's two words that we need to discuss right there. *Trunk* and *attic*. Now, trunk. A trunk is part of a car. [pause] But is a car in the attic?
Students:	No.
Ms. Lucero:	And what is an attic?
Jose:	Somewhere where you put old things.
Ms. Lucero:	Somewhere where they put old things. Where can you find an attic?
Eduardo:	Up your house. [points upward]
Ms. Lucero:	In some houses that are maybe two stories or more [motions structural levels], there's a little area up where the roof [makes an A-shape in the air] is at. There's a little room [motions a structural level]. It's called an—
Students:	Attic.
Ms. Lucero:	Sometimes they [people] use it just to put junk in there. Sometimes they fix it up, and you even use it as a room. In her house, I think they're using it as a place to put what?

Students:	Junk.
Ms. Lucero:	Junk or maybe things they're not using, like we use our garages. Where do you put things? Where does mom and dad put things that they're not using?
Students:	The garage.
Ms. Lucero:	The garage. Well, they have an attic. So there was a trunk in the—
Students:	Attic.
Ms. Lucero:	Now what do you think trunk is? [pause] Now, remember, what did she find? They found—she found bracelets and earrings in the trunk? What could it be?
Nayeli:	Uhmm . . . .
Salvador:	Oooh! [waving his right hand]
Ms. Lucero:	What would you put bracelets and earrings in?
Isel:	A box.
Salvador:	In a box?
Ms. Lucero:	In a box! A trunk is like a—
Students:	Box.
Ms. Lucero:	A BIG box. Sometimes they're like this big [leans over to show width of a big box] and you open 'em up like this [motions the opening of a treasure chest lid]. It's like a treasure chest.
Ms. Lucero:	There's a—oh! How many of your parents have like a big suitcase? [pause] That's like a big box? [leans over to motion toward an imaginary box] And sometimes you open it up [motions the opening of a treasure chest lid] and it looks like a treasure chest or like—a trunk. A trunk is a what? A big box where you put things. Do any of your families have a trunk? Any big trunks? [several students raise their hands]
Ms. Lucero:	Yeah. And they're pretty heavy to carry.
Students:	Yeah.
Marcos:	Yep.
Ms. Lucero:	Especially filled with lots of things. Alright.

Certainly, Ms. Lucero was quite strategic about building on her students' current understandings of trunks and attics, specifically drawing on their cultural practices and knowledge—car trunks, jewelry (i.e., earrings, bracelets), jewelry "boxes," garages, houses, treasure chests, suitcases, junk, storage containers. Rather than provide students with the definition of *trunk* and *attic*, she proceeds through an elaborate sequence of connections to arrive at a potentially more concrete understanding of what these words mean in the context of the story.

Although she uses the I-R-E pattern of talk, she does, for example, build on students' prior knowledge of suitcases ("There's a—oh! How many of your parents have like a big suitcase?") to liken a big suitcase to a trunk. Ms. Lucero also uses logical deductions ("Now, a trunk is part of a car, but is a car in the attic?") and

context cues from the text ("Now, remember, what did she found? They found—she found bracelets and earrings in the trunk?") to mediate students' ability to arrive at the correct definitions, especially because *attic* and *trunk* have multiple meanings. Finally, Ms. Lucero uses bodily gestures to motion different structural levels in a house, represent an A-shaped roof, a large box, and motion the opening of a treasure chest and suitcase.

From a cultural-historical perspective, Ms. Lucero used a variety of tools (i.e., talk, cultural knowledge, gestures, comparisons, and text) to help expand her students' lexicon, as these vocabulary words were central to the narrative they were reading. Nevertheless, Ms. Lucero and her students were oriented toward vocabulary building: even though they spent a substantial amount of time discussing these keywords, the focus was clearly not based or initiated by students' meaning making of the story. Consider that in fact Ms. Lucero and not the students instigated the discussion about *attic* and *trunk* after Ramiro correctly answered her initial question, which included the word *trunk* ("In a trunk. Now, what is a *trunk*?"). This particular practice illustrates how Ms. Lucero oriented "discussions" toward vocabulary development and raises concerns about how an overemphasis on vocabulary compromises the broader sense making these ELLs will need across their academic trajectories. Recall that these ELLs were making the transition from mostly Spanish reading to English-only reading so that we might expect them to need ongoing, strategic assistance unpacking text meanings, particularly through key vocabulary words in English.

A cultural-historical perspective urges us to question whether the social organization of reading practices promote "the image of reading as a whole" so that skills like vocabulary development matter as they pertain to joint (re)interpretations of the world. These questions are further complicated by our concern for the number of bilingual students who are perhaps fluent Spanish readers but formally encounter English-only reading practices in school contexts where their reading fluency in Spanish is undermined through skills-based practices. In Ms. Lucero's classroom, for example, how often are "discussions" based on defining vocabulary words? How often do students instigate sense making around particular texts? How are students encouraged to draw on the languages and literacies they develop through their participation across cultural communities to develop the meaning making and critical thinking we value across formal academic contexts?

We have deliberately examined some of these questions across formal and informal learning contexts. Next, we share our participation and research in one bilingual middle school classroom that drew specifically on Latino/a students' languages, literacies, and social-political sensibilities, which provided an opportunity to explore how these practices affected the academic capabilities that matter in and beyond formal school contexts.

Facilitating Sociocritical Literacies

In this section, we draw on research that explored the translation practices of Chicano/a and Latino/a bilingual youth. Rather than remediating these students' documented academic deficiencies via standardized tests and prepackaged

curricula, we used the social critiques these youth *already* possessed to *re*mediate a curriculum unit. This unit was developed as part of a larger effort to leverage bilingual youths' translation experiences for the development of academic literacies (Orellana & Eksner, 2006; Orellana & Reynolds, 2008; for a fuller discussion of the curriculum, see Martínez, Orellana, Pacheco, & Carbone, in press). For example, this past research documented how English–Spanish bilingual youth help their Spanish-speaking families and community members negotiate important social exchanges in grocery stores, doctor's offices, and schools, for example (Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner, & Meza, 2003). For the purpose of this analysis, I focus on how the research team created critical discursive spaces where these youth built on local knowledge and social critiques to engage in critical social thought, or what we have called sociocritical literacies (Gutiérrez, 2002, 2007).

To be clear, these students do not engage in these practices because of their race or ethnicity, because we know Chicano/a and Latino/a students differ in their bilingual capacities and participate in various cultural communities. From a cultural-historical perspective, these students expand their strategic use of language varieties, genres, registers, codes, and scripts through participating in cultural practices across a range of social and community contexts.

During our curriculum unit, we held ongoing discussions about the range of translation experiences of these sixth-grade students and designed a culminating writing task in which students "translated" their stance on one social issue to two distinct audiences. We specifically designed tasks that helped students unpack these translation experiences and practices, and our in-class discussions revealed the socioculturally complex dimensions of this everyday practice. Even as children, they recognized how adults (and society) constantly positioned them across translation encounters as novices, experts, nuisances, and so on. For example, Pablo shared a particularly unnerving encounter in which he negotiated between his monolingual English-speaking principal and his monolingual Spanish-speaking mother.

The angry principal called the family home to let Pablo's mother know that he suspended Pablo's older brother, César, for a school violation. In César's presence, Pablo had to help both the angry principal and his distressed mother reach some mutual understanding about the matter. Pablo's challenges during the encounter illustrate child translators' awareness of social context and of power differentials, including the ongoing consequences of their ongoing decision making. Pablo and his peers unpacked the social-cultural dimensions of this familiar experience by identifying the following challenges that Pablo faced during this situation. Pablo had to do the following:

- Maintain some neutrality in his discussions with an angry principal
- Advocate effectively on behalf of his mother as she voiced questions, concerns, and a defense of her son to the principal
- Preserve his loyalty to César while he essentially carried out César's punishment
- Maintain his composure as he mediated between the principal's frustration, his mother's palpable concern, and César's anxiety

For Pablo and his peers, translation was not just about relaying a message across two languages—these students were adept at interpreting context and power through language use, word choices, tones, gestures, facial expressions, and body movements. We facilitated students' use of this sociocultural knowledge in their final essays (e.g., how to express particular tones and emotions in their writing).

Of relevance, our discussions about translation coincided with the latest manifestation of the (im)migration "debates" in the United States that occurred after the House of Representatives passed HR 4437 (The Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005). We share one specific discussion to highlight how, despite their documented "underperformance" and "underachievement," these Chicano/a and Latino/a sixth-grade students engaged in social critique that challenged the dispositions promoted through curriculum-based approaches to learning. In our work, we explored how these diverse forms of knowledge served as resources for expansive learning and for the development of sociocritical literacies in particular.

Given the social-political context, we found strategic ways to address the (im)migration issue that so impassioned these sixth graders' transformative acts of resistance (i.e., student-led walkouts), and at the same time facilitated their critical thinking about translation as a benign social practice. We used the road sign depicted in Figure 5.2 to reflect critically on both the (mis)representation of (im)migrant communities in broader U.S. discourses, as well as the perceived accuracy of translated messages.

In cultural-historical terms, semiotic signs like the one depicted in Figure 5.2 mediate particular messages or representations of the world; in turn, we interpret and reconstruct these messages in particular ways. For example, the semiotic sign depicted in Figure 5.2 might overtly caution drivers to watch for pedestrians crossing the road, but this sign also could be interpreted as fossilizing an image of historically and economically diverse Latino/a communities as "border crossers." We encouraged students to deconstruct the sign with which many of them were already so familiar. They immediately noticed a discrepancy: although the word *caution* is purportedly translated into Spanish as *prohibido*, in actuality the sign sends the message of *prohibited* to speakers and readers of Spanish. We used this discrepancy to engage students in considering why this sign might depict two very distinct albeit politicized messages to two language-specific audiences who represent unique categories of people in the U.S. sociopolitical and economic landscape.

Exploring Semiotic Signs

Our everyday lives are saturated with semiotic signs—in the streets of our communities and in virtual worlds, for example. These signs construct particular social relations that reify the world as it is. Educators and practitioners can draw on these signs as an opportunity for students to express their critical readings, or develop critical readings, of these social relations with respect to their own material realities. Moreover, students and teachers could use *historical thinking* to interrogate the social circumstances that gave rise to these semiotic signs and to explore the potentially transformative power of ones that promote a socially just world.

Figure 5. 2.   Thinking Critically About Signs

Photo by Sean Biehle. © 2002 by Sean Biehle.

To extend students' analytic thinking around semiotic signs, we showed our students a video clip produced by a well-known Latino/a comedian who examined how "people on the street" interpreted this freeway sign. The clip included an interview with a representative of the Department of Transportation (DoT) about what specific group of people is depicted in the sign. When the comedian claims to turn off the camera (and hence interviews the individual under the pretense of confidentiality), the DoT representative states, "Who's the sign for? [pause] Wetbacks." The word *wetback* had a particularly palpable affect on our Chicano/a and Latino/a students, even though the DoT representative was unclear about how the sign was specifically supposed to mitigate "wetbacks" crossing the freeway. To be clear, we meant to use this video clip to facilitate discussions about translation and semiotic signs, and how these tools/artifacts together shape and are shaped by broader social-political concerns (e.g., [im]migration). However, the discussion that ensued demonstrated first how students applied their various forms of knowledge and second how students developed their current thinking about this issue.

In the classroom dialogue that follows, we present a portion of students' elaborations on the (mis)representation of the Latino/a (im)migrant community in the signs and symbols that permeate our everyday lives. One of the authors

(Mariana) facilitated students' application of their cultural, historical, and political knowledge to articulate their social critiques about the treatment of (im)migrants in the United States and the race-based discourses that inevitably characterize the (im)migrant experience. These elaborations were supposed to provide an example of how students could begin to organize their final essay—the culminating task—which required them to identify a social issue (like [im]migration) and "translate" their stance on the issue to two different audiences.

Maritza: Why do they put the sign up for immigrants if the people that put the sign up are immigrants themselves? The U.S. belonged to the Natives so everyone is an immigrant.

Mariana: Did everybody—can somebody else repeat the question that Maritza asked? A little bit louder.

Students: [inaudible]

Mariana: A little bit louder.

Osvaldo: That aren't the white immigrants too because the Native Americans... [were here first]?

Mariana: OK, that's a very good question that you would ask to the man from the Department of Transportation or other people right? Right? That would be a very excellent question, if you would write a letter to him and if you were going to write about how there's racism in this country against the immigrants. That would be one really, really good point, a question that you would make to somebody like the guy who was calling [(im)migrants] wetbacks, who was saying that the sign is for wetbacks. That's one very good question. Anthony?

Anthony: I don't want to say it out loud.

Mariana: Just say it out loud. We're all friends.

Anthony: Then, why do they call white people "white trash"?

Mariana: Why do they call white people white trash? Who wants to take a—

Rolando: Mexicans. They [whites] kept calling them [Mexicans] wetbacks so they started calling them white trash.

Mariana: We [Mexicans] wanted a name to call them [whites]? OK, Maritza?

Maritza: Um, I wouldn't write it to that guy. I would write it to [President] Bush.

Mariana: So Maritza says, "I wouldn't write it to that guy." She would go straight to the top, and she would write it to somebody like President Bush, right? Is there somebody else you could write it to?

Students: Arnold [Schwarzenegger]. . . . The Governor . . .

This particular exchange emerged during our analysis of highway sign and the DoT representative's claim that it was intended for "wetbacks." It is clear from the excerpt that students used "they" to index a political power structure that was largely determined by the actions and decisions of "white people," and that "they" referred to "Mexicans." The relevance of this exchange lies in how the cultural

organization of discourse built on students' varied knowledges, rather than engaged students in knowledge reproduction or in lengthy skills-driven interactions (as in the example from Ms. Lucero's class). Surely, these Chicano/a and Latino/a students need some skills-based instruction, perhaps not unlike many sixth graders across ethnic and socioeconomic groups throughout the country. Nevertheless, our ongoing tasks were strategically oriented toward facilitating students' thoughtful, analytic construction of a final essay.

Through this discussion, students applied their historical knowledge of European and non-European (im)migration to the United States (i.e., "aren't the whites immigrants too," "The U.S. belonged to the Natives so everyone is an immigrant"), historical knowledge of Native American exploitation (i.e., "Native Americans were here first"), awareness and interpretations of race-based discourses (i.e., "wetbacks," "white trash"), and powerful critiques of political figures they perceived as anti-(im)migrant (i.e., "the Governator"). In the interaction, Mariana was doing very little "teaching" and instead taking up students' views and encouraging them to engage one another's ideas ("Why do they call white people white trash? Who wants to take a . . .") in preparation for their final essay.

The cultural organization of discourse extended I-R-E patterns but more importantly, the social context created the discursive space for students to take risks and create new discursive trajectories based on their own musings, as illustrated through Anthony's question. It is clear that Anthony was apprehensive about even articulating his question: perhaps this hesitancy reflected his years of schooling during which student-initiated questions are limited, especially questions related to such politically charged topics like race and power. Moreover, Mariana refrained from answering the question and instead redirected it back to the class. Rolando inevitably answered the question, only for Maritza to revisit the audience who she believed most needed to hear her stance—President Bush.

In short, this example illustrates one way we built on students' cultures in the service of academic and sociocritical literacies. We drew on the knowledge and critiques students developed through their participation in various cultural contexts, including but not limited to schools, and facilitated literacy goals that expanded students' interpretations, views, and readings of the world. Given these students' social-political sensibilities, they also articulated their perception of the ways the world reads *them* as Chicanos/as and Latinos/as who are either (im)migrants or the descendants of (im)migrants, and ways to transcend—and perhaps transform—current social arrangements.

It is important to emphasize that even this class of Chicano/a and Latino/a students reflected a broad diversity of cultural experiences, languages, knowledge, understanding, and sociocritical literacies, because we do not wish to replace one supposition about low-income nondominant students with another. In this case, not all students felt strongly about the (im)migration debate and only a quarter of the class actually participated in the walkouts that the school's students organized to voice their opposition to HR 4437. Nonetheless, we based our modifications to the translation-based curriculum unit on what we learned from students as social actors that traverse various cultural communities in their everyday lives and on the social-political dynamics at play within and beyond the classroom walls.

Conclusions

A cultural-historical theoretical approach to literacy emphasizes the relationship between human learning and development and the social contexts that foster this development. This perspective places culture "in the middle," as culture provides us with the resources to realize varied and hybrid ways of being, believing, valuing, knowing, and learning. Put another way, the capabilities we develop across various cultural contexts are essentially our "cultural capabilities." This view challenges contemporary approaches to culture and cultural differences that essentialize students based on working assumptions about race, ethnicity, language, religion, class, sexuality, or group histories, especially those students who are deemed "different" (which inevitably renders whiteness the norm). Based on a view of culture as the accumulated tools and artifacts that mediate our everyday activities across cultural communities, we believe this theory has powerful implications for reexamining students' literacy learning in classrooms. We also believe cultural-historical theory has equally powerful implications for imagining new kinds of classroom learning organized around the social, cultural, intellectual, and political knowledge of students aimed at facilitating sociocritical literacies.

Our classroom examples illustrate the usefulness of this theoretical approach for reexamining how social contexts—the organization of talk, classroom discourse, space, texts, ideas, tools and artifacts (signs and video), for example—affect the development of students' literacy toolkits. Ms. Lucero used similar discourse patterns that nevertheless enhanced students' coconstruction of vocabulary definitions. Still, she managed an exchange that was ostensibly oriented toward skills that are necessary but not sufficient for the kind of meaning making we value across academic contexts. In the sixth-grade class, on the other hand, we organized popular cultural tools and discussions around the sociocritical literacies students already embodied so that discussions were patterned but not limited to a predetermined outcome (like information recall or defining a word). So, what can we learn about culture from these examples?

Current approaches to literacy learning are perhaps ignoring the resources available through the repertoires of (literacy) practices students develop across their cultural communities. To capitalize on these resources, however, educators and practitioners will need to expand their curricular methods and approaches to learn *about*, *from*, and *with* their students, especially students whose communities and histories are least familiar to us. We make some recommendations for teachers here, although we recognize that a cultural-historical approach to literacy teaching and learning emphasizes the unique social, cultural, and historical contexts embedded in the cultural community of the classroom. We believe a cultural-historical theory that emphasizes culturally specific ways of being, believing, valuing, knowing, and learning provides powerful constructs for reimagining how we might better assist our students, particularly our historically underperforming students, across their long-term life trajectories in and out of schools.

Recommendations for Educators and Classroom Applications

Cultural-historical perspectives that emphasize the socially and culturally mediated nature of learning and development can help practitioners reconceptualize what (and how much) students know and how to build on those cultural capabilities. Educators and practitioners can promote a view of literacy that seeks to expand students' repertoires of practice if they hope to enhance the academic potential of all students, and ELLs and nondominant students in particular. Students have developed particular literacies in their families and communities (e.g., translating and other *funds of knowledge*). The school-based literacies we organize in classrooms (e.g., summarizing texts, vocabulary development) add to this repertoire, which continues to expand during and well beyond school. However, these teaching and learning practices must lead to expanding students' repertoires of literacy. For example, while Ms. Lucero built on what and how much students knew about trunks and attics, an overwhelming focus on vocabulary development for ELLs diminished their participation in critical sense making.

Specifically, cultural-historical perspectives promote a view of teaching and learning that is oriented toward the ongoing *re*-mediation, or *re*organization, of the social configurations and tools and artifacts that facilitate reading and literacy. Teachers can seek to mediate and *re*-mediate a range of social contexts that provide multiple opportunities for students to construct knowledge and develop understanding, rather than depend on remedial approaches that continue to fail nondominant students especially. For example, teachers should alter *how* students participate in literacy activity through a combination of dyads, small groups, whole groups, cross-age and cross-grade groups, joint writing, and joint virtual activity. This range of social configurations facilitates multiple and ongoing literacy learning opportunities. Moreover, a broader range of tools and artifacts can enhance these literacy learning opportunities, especially when they reflect students' lived realities. These tools and artifacts might include documentaries, curriculum programs, music, supplemental texts, popular cultural tools, virtual and digital worlds, e-mail exchanges, guest speakers, community outings, and video. For example, the sixth-grade translation-based curriculum unit described earlier made use of a familiar but contentious highway sign to help students think critically and to explore their sociopolitical sensibilities in the service of academic literacy.

Too often, classrooms position students as "learners" when in actuality, they can participate as "teachers" in contexts that build on their knowledge and understandings. Educators and practitioners can hence organize for ongoing shifts in the roles students play in the classroom through varied opportunities as "novices" and "experts" as well as "teachers" and "learners" across a range of literacy tasks. For example, Pablo was able to share his expertise as a translator and participated in the class's unpacking of the cultural capabilities embedded in this everyday literacy practice in his family and community. Moreover, in our implementation of the unit, the class was able to "teach" us about their community-based knowledge that was unfortunately ignored in the district's language arts curriculum.

To build on what our students know, teachers can look to families and communities as ongoing sources of expertise about students' everyday practices

and as potential contributors to classroom literacy learning. The *funds of knowledge* approach Moll and his colleagues implemented has been a particularly productive model of deliberate examinations of the cultural resources available in students' families and communities. This approach challenges us to also learn about students' participation in out-of-school, after-school, alternative summer school, and community-based contexts, for example, where learning is organized around the application of literacy (e.g., digital storytelling [Nixon & Gutiérrez, 2007]), rather than literacy skills per se. Deepening our learning about students' literacy experiences beyond the classroom might foster more complex, nuanced understandings of their experiences and challenge us to continually reject deficit-oriented views and static notions of our students' communities and worlds.

Finally, we encourage literacy educators, practitioners, and researchers to engage with colleagues in a deliberate reexamination of the literacies we currently foster through our classroom cultural communities. Together, we must consider how our current literacy practices inadvertently affect our historically underserved students and perpetuate their academic vulnerabilities in the long-term. Moreover, we must consider the extent to which school-based literacies reflect the "real" reading and writing adults do across everyday contexts (as citizens, consumers, community members, activists, professionals, etc.). These dialogues could potentially transform the ways educators and practitioners reconceptualize literacy teaching and learning to explore ways to learn *about* our students, *from* our students, and *with* our students to expand the power of their lived knowledge and sensibilities.

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