Hybridity as a Resource for Learning in the Classroom

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...Comemos pizza en la casa de Hugo... Era su cumpleaños... Vimos el movie de Snow White. Era sad por que la mamá de Snow White se murió. El King se casó con otra... (Dalia, 8 años)

...Yo y mi primo jugamos “zombie killing mummies” que es un videogame en inglés. Después comimos la rosca de reyes para ver quién iba a ganar el bebe de plástico... (Omar, 7 años)

... Mi mamá cuando tenía seis años nunca tenía juguetes como yo. Ella cuidaba a las vacas y las borregas y las chibas... Y mi mamá les daba de comer a las gallinas y a los pavos y a los pollitos. Y ella les limpiaba el corral a los animales... (Andrea, 7 años)

The excerpts above come from conversations I had with Dalia, Omar and Andrea about the narratives they had written in their journals. These children were students in a first/second grade bilingual classroom in a public school located in a small rural community in Oregon near the university where I teach. They, as well as all their classmates, were of Latino backgrounds, and spoke either mostly Spanish, or both Spanish and English at home.

During the three years that I collaborated with the teacher in this classroom, through my weekly visits, my participation in class activities, and my conversations with the children and their parents, it became clear to me that the identities of these children were continually shaped by the hybrid linguistic, cultural and social practices that constituted their daily lives. I came to realize that the hybridized nature of these children’s experiences was an important strength that could be explored as a resource for learning in the classroom, and hopefully as a tool for transforming the culture of the school.

Discourses, Hybridity, and Third Space

Jame Gee introduced the notion of Discourses (with a capital “D”) to describe the ways of behaving, interacting, thinking, and believing “that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities... by particular groups” (Gee, 2012, p. 3). As he explains, Discourses constitute our
socially-situated identities. Each Discourse embodies practices that are generally taken-for-granted and accepted as “common sense,” “normal,” or “the right way” to think or behave. In this sense, the concept of Discourse is closely linked to notions of power and privilege in society.

Each of us belong to many Discourses, and each Discourse is an aspect of our multiple identities. The first Discourse we learn, which is usually focused on the home and our families, is our primary Discourse. Secondary Discourses are learned through the social institutions (e.g., school, church, work) with which we become affiliated. These Discourses rarely represent congruent and harmonious values. As we navigate through the Discourses that affect our lives, we often face conflicts and tensions. For some people, however, these tensions and conflicts are considerably more drastic than for others.

Children who best succeed in school are those whose homes incorporate aspects of school-based Discourses into their primary socialization. In the United States, this is often the case of European American, middle class families (Moje et al., 2004). When these children start their schooling, they identify aspects of their home-based Discourses in the academic tasks they are asked to perform. However, as Gee (2012) explains, some minority children in the United States experience deep and painful conflicts between their home-based Discourses and the Discourses of the school. The primary Discourses they bring with them from their homes are not recognized by school, or utilized as a foundation for building a secondary Discourse. “Indeed, the values of many school-based Discourses treat some minority children as ‘other’ and their social practices as ‘deviant’ and non-standard” (Gee, 2012, p. 4). These children easily become alienated, threatened, and disconnected from school, creating a pattern of academic failure.

In an effort to disrupt this pattern of school alienation and failure, several scholars (e.g., Gutierrez, 2008; Moje et al., 2004; Zeichner, 2008) have recently called for the active integration
of primary and secondary Discourses into the school classroom. They propose that the space of the classroom be reconstructed as an alternative “third space” where students are encouraged to cross boundaries between the “first space” of their homes and communities, and the “second space” of the school. In this new space, children are encouraged to generate new forms of knowledge that can be used as resources for learning at school.

The concept of third space was first proposed by Homi Bhabha (1994), based on hybridity theory, as a metaphor for the space in which cultures meet. For him, third space provides the possibility for creative forms of identity, which are “produced on the boundaries of in-between forms of difference, in the intersections and overlaps across spheres of class, gender, race, nation, generation, location” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1). Hybridity theory rejects binary categories such as “global” vs. “local,” or “academic” vs. “social”, and recognizes that individuals employ a variety of tools to make sense of the world. In the third space, what seems to be oppositional Discourses can be merged together to generate alternative forms of knowledge. Third space is tentative, flexible and constantly shifting to capture the complexity of individuals’ dynamic identities (Gannon, 2010). As Gutierrez (2008) argues, “third space is a transformative space where the potential for an expanded form of learning and the development of new knowledge are heightened” (p. 152).

**Context of the Study**

This study was a collaboration between me (Maria) and the classroom teacher (Shannon). Shannon was a former graduate student of mine, and welcomed me into her classroom. I knew that Shannon was an extraordinary teacher, and I asked her to collaborate with me on an ethnographic project in her classroom. Our relationship started as a typical teacher-researcher partnership. Little by little, however, our roles were transformed through our shared experiences
with the children and our ongoing dialogues and emerging interpretations of those experiences. Slowly, we attempted to engage the children in our collaborative ethnography, and the lines between research and praxis gradually became blurred.

As mentioned earlier, the school was located in a small community in rural Oregon. All the children were of Latino backgrounds whose parents held jobs in local tree farms, vineyards, or other businesses such as shops and restaurants. Most of the children had extended family members in the area. Shannon’s class was part of a transitional bilingual program, where instruction in all subjects was delivered in Spanish, with the exception of a daily 30-minute period for English language development. Typical of transitional bilingual programs, the percentage of instructional time in English increased as the students progressed through the elementary grades (and the instructional time in Spanish decreased). By the time the children reached middle school (sixth grade), all the instruction was in English.

During the three years of our collaboration (2009-2012), the school faced increased pressures to get its students to pass a number of standardized tests that were mandated by the government. For each of those years, the school’s test results were considerably lower than the state average, and the pressures to raise test scores became heavier and heavier. Because the tests were written in English, the bilingual program started to be viewed as problematic. Efforts were made to offer more English instruction in earlier grades, and the children who were proficient in English were moved out of bilingual classrooms. In other words, the bilingual program was considered “remedial,” as a bridge towards English mastery. There were no efforts to develop and maintain the children’s home language, Spanish. In addition, unfair burdens were being placed on the Spanish-speaking children, who were over-tested and subjected to reductionist teaching practices for acquisition of “basic skills” addressed in the tests. In some cases, children
were being tested in English every two weeks, which caused a tremendous amount of anxiety and frustration for them and their parents.

Shannon and I were witnessing what McCarthy (2011) calls a “language-as-a-problem ideology.” The children’s Spanish language was viewed as a deficit, or an obstacle standing in the way of English acquisition and assimilation. The Latino students and their families were often marginalized and vilified, blamed for the school’s low test scores. In our conversations, Shannon and I reflected on several actions taken by the school administration that were quite oppressive and unjust. Together, we plotted to resist and subvert those actions within the space of her classroom. Shannon’s resistance was grounded on her commitment to create meaningful learning opportunities for her students, while respecting and celebrating their home language and culture. As a teacher, she sought to transform her classroom instead of simply reproduce the oppressive reality around her (Ricento & Hornberger, 1996).

The Classroom as a Third Space

Through a process of collaboration and integration of hybrid linguistic and cultural practices, Shannon and the children were able to co-create a third space within their classroom, which provided alternative opportunities for success in school learning.

In my weekly visits to the classroom, as I participated in activities with the children, I came to realize that the development of this productive hybrid space was mediated by a range of processes that allowed the children to draw from their multiple resources and “funds of knowledge” (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Below I discuss some of these processes, which were carefully orchestrated by Shannon and appropriated by the children. Gradually, these practices became part of the collective classroom culture.
Flexible teaching and learning roles. The learning of new concepts was facilitated by a number of activities that encouraged dialogue, questioning and hands-on experimentation. The physical space of the classroom was quite flexible, and allowed for different participation structures, such as quite corners with comfortable chairs for individual reading, tables for group work, and a carpet area where the children gathered together to listen to stories and participated in whole-group activities. The children performed a variety of roles within the classroom, as they performed experiments, collaborated on projects, or engaged in reciprocal teaching.

During one of my visits, when the class was studying about whales and trying to figure out how they could swim in the cold waters of Antarctica, Shannon asked the children to conduct an experiment so they could understand the importance of the layer of blubber that covers the whale’s body. She created a “glove” made of a plastic bag full of vegetable shortening (to simulate the layer of blubber). She then asked the children to wear the “glove” in one hand. She filled two plastic tubs with ice cold water and children were then told to put their two hands (one with the glove and the other without) in the water to see which hand would feel the cold water. When Hugo felt the cold water on his bare hand, he immediately exclaimed: “Las ballenas pueden vivir en agua fría con su capa de grasa!” (field journal, 4/5/11)

Mixed genres and codes. The mixing of Spanish and English in the classroom contributed to a safe learning environment and expanded opportunities for learning and critical inquiry. In order to build robust understandings and to expand the children’s linguistic repertoires, the content was often introduced in one language and then revisited in another. Rather than demand an artificial separation of languages, Shannon celebrated and encouraged the “translanguaging” (García, 2009) linguistic practices that were commonplace in the children’s homes. In addition to Spanish and English, Shannon also taught American Sign Language to the children, which they used during singing and dramatic performances.
Multimodalities. The children were encouraged to learn through multiple modes of representation, including drawing, songs, games, movies, and dance. These multimodal forms of communication acted as mediational tools to help learners to build new knowledge and complement other forms of representation that are traditionally valued and promoted at school, such as reading, writing and math (Street, 2005).

Today the class was learning about pelicans. Shannon showed several short movies of pelicans in nature and told the children to observe carefully. In one movie, a pelican was swimming in the water. In another movie, a pelican had caught a fish, and a bird was trying to steal the fish. Yet another movie showed a pelican in a nest. After watching the movies, Shannon asked the children to share with each other what they had observed. Evelyn said, “¡Hacen nidos en la tierra!” Joshua added, “¡Estan le robando la comida, y pescan peces!” (field journal, 1/24/12)

Unscripted dialogue and instructional conversations. Shannon frequently engaged in instructional conversations with the children while systematically encouraging them to make connections between the formal school knowledge and their individual, family, and community knowledge. Through this collaborative process of dialogic teaching, Shannon was able build her lessons from a common understanding of the children’s experiences. She carefully listened to their ideas, and incorporated their contributions into the conversation.

S: ¿Qué comen las lechuza?
C: ¡Pájaros!
S: Si, aves chiquitas.
C: ¿Cómo el colibrí?
S: Sí. La lechuza puede comer el colibrí.
C: ¿Venados?
C: ¿Perros?
C: Maestra, ¿puede comer una araña?
S: Creo que sí, pero voy a buscar la información
C: Mi abuelita tiene una granja y hay una lechuza ahí!
S: ¡Buenas conexiones! (field journal, 1/12/12)

Incorporation of children’s transnational identities into the curriculum. In addition to integrating content and building connections to the children’s local communities, Shannon acknowledged an important aspect of the identities of the children in her classroom: the fact that they had immediate or extended family relationships that crossed national borders. In her curriculum, Shannon included both formal and informal connections with the children’s Latin American heritage.

Today, the class was talking about the migration of the hummingbirds. Shannon picked up a globe and showed the class their trajectory. She took that opportunity to compare it to Alfredo’s recent trip to Mexico. (field journal, 5/24/11)
When I arrived in the classroom, the room was decorated with the children’s art projects about the Mexican flag. They were studying the eagle, and Shannon had read to them the story of the eagle eating the serpent that is represented on the flag. (field journal, 4/6/12)

![Figure 2: Children’s art projects about the Mexican flag](image)

Connections with families at home and at school. Another important element of Shannon’s teaching was the constant connections that she made with the children’s parents and
other family members. Her classroom always had parent visitors, who helped her with different projects, such as creating art displays for the walls, reading with the children, or helping with group activities. I became acquainted with several of the mothers, sisters and aunts who frequented the classroom, and to my amazement, they would return the following year even when their own children were no longer in Shannon’s classroom. Obviously, they felt quite welcome in the space of her classroom.

Together with her colleagues, Shannon also organized several activities to bring all the families together, create community, and build a sense of belonging for them at school. One example was a school-wide celebration of the “Children’s Day,” in which the families participated in organized games and competitions, enjoyed dinner together, and watched performances of folk dances by some of the children. Another example was a “Farewell Dinner” that Shannon and I organized at the university for the end of the year. The families took a tour of the campus, enjoyed dinner, and were presented with some of the children’s school work. The children were always extremely proud to have their parents and relatives participate in their school lives.

Figure 3: A parent reads to a group of children in the classroom

**Family Journals.** During the second year of the study, as Shannon and I continued to reflect on ways to build bridges between the children’s homes and the school, we came up with
the idea of creating a family journal for the class. Since the children were studying about birds, we put together a bag with a stuffed animal of the bird they were studying and a notebook. Each evening, a different child would take the bag home; they were encouraged to play with the animal and write on the journal together with their families. The next day in class, that child would read to the class what they had written in the journal, and then pass the bag to another student to take it home that evening. The family journals became an extremely successful activity, and quite popular among the children and the families. The children waited with anticipation for their turn to take the journals home and were very interested in hearing each other’s stories each morning. We started the first journal rotation by asking the children to simply write about the activities of their evenings. Many of the children wrote about meals with their families, and other leisure activities such as playing games, visiting friends, watching TV, and going shopping. During the second journal rotation, we added a different stuffed animal to the bag and asked the children to write about their plans for future careers and occupations. The children wrote about their dreams of becoming police officers, ballet dancers, soccer coaches, and teachers. Finally, in the third rotation, we again added another animal and asked the children to talk to their parents about stories from their childhoods and write about them in the journals. They wrote stories with beautiful illustrations about their parents’ favorite games, their close friends, and their daily routines, often contrasting their parents’ childhood activities to their own present lives. During my visits to the classroom, I would often pick up the journal, sit down with some of the children, and ask them to read their stories to me. The children greatly enjoyed telling me their stories, and would often add elaborated details that had not been included in their written entries. Their stories reflected the hybrid nature of their linguistic, social and cultural practices.
The journals became an important vehicle for the children to transform their everyday forms of knowledge into school knowledge. By sharing their family stories with each other, the children and their families were able to build a collective culture that elevated and formalized their common experiences. Through the journals, the children’s stories about their social activities, their hopes for the future, and their families’ heritage were brought into the formal space of the school. Their multiple Discourses were valued and promoted at school as legitimate ways of knowing.

*I arrived in the classroom and Hugo had just read his journal to the class. He had shared a childhood story of his dad, who used to play tricks on donkeys by tying bottles on their tales. All the kids were laughing and asking Hugo many questions about his dad’s childhood pranks!* (field journal, 3/19/12)

*Cuando sea grande quiero ser maestra de inglés para que aprenden a ser bilingües* (Brianna’s journal)

*Yo cuando sea grande voy a ser jardinero para trabajar como mi papa* (José’s journal)

*Cuando mi mama tenía 9 años antes de ir a la escuela tenía que ir al molino a moler masa para hacer tortillas* (Evelin’s journal)

*Cuando mi papa tenía 11 años, él jugaba en un equipo de fútbol, A él le gustaba mucho* (Nayeli’s journal, with a drawing of kids playing American football).

![Figure 4: Nayeli’s journal entry](image)
Concluding Thoughts

Moje et al. (2004) contend that when classrooms are transformed into hybrid third spaces, important possibilities for new learning are created. The third space can not only serve to bridge children’s home and school discourses, but also serve as a navigational tool to help them understand conventions and practices of a new discourse community. Perhaps most importantly, the third space challenges and reshapes both academic and everyday practices and redefines what counts as valid school knowledge.

As we have seen through the narratives above, Shannon and the children were able to transform conflict and difference into rich zones of collaboration and learning (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda, 1999). Her resistance to the rigid mandates of the school administration and her systematic, planned actions produced a hybrid space that gave the children tools accessing and reshaping school knowledge within the walls of her classroom.

Shannon was well regarded as a teacher by the families and her colleagues. I was hopeful that the culture of the school could be transformed to mirror the practices created within Shannon’s classroom, but unfortunately this wasn’t going to be the case…

An Update

The oppressive policies coming from above were too strong and powerful, and Shannon’s struggles and confrontations with the school administration escalated. At the end of the third year of our study, she was feeling exhausted and demoralized. That summer she was offered a job at a neighboring school district, and made the difficult decision to leave.

Because the school district is so close to the university where I teach, I continued to participate in the life of the school through different projects, such as internships for our student-
teachers and workshops I delivered for the faculty. I was able to follow the events that occurred after Shannon’s departure from a distance.

The year after Shannon left, the state government placed heavy sanctions on the school because of its lack of progress on the standardized tests. This meant that the teachers had to implement reforms and follow a very strict curriculum. Outsiders were brought into the classrooms to observe the teachers and make sure that the curriculum was followed with fidelity. The teachers in the school did not have any freedom for creativity, as they were constantly being watched. At the end of the year, the pressures from the state government became so great, that the district administration made the decision to close the school and re-distribute the children and the teachers among the other three elementary schools in the district. The community of the school was shattered.

The new academic year began just two months ago, and the children are attempting a new beginning, with new classmates, teachers, and different established practices. It is my hope that they will find the strength to continue to create opportunities to exercise their hybrid identities in within the spaces of their new schools.
References


