“Realizing Transitions: Common Core, College, Career”

Selected Proceedings of the 2013 Michigan Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages Conference

October 4 & 5, 2013

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2014

The Selected Proceedings of the 2013 MITESOL Conference
Bridging Home and School: Using ELL Funds of Knowledge to Enrich English Language Arts Teaching

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Abstract

At the pre-service level, teachers are often ill-prepared to best serve their English as a Second Language (ESL) students. Some textbooks for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) trainees do address the importance of utilizing students’ funds of knowledge and cite some examples of successful cases where funds of knowledge have been accessed and leveraged into rigorous academic learning (Díaz-Rico, 2004; Díaz-Rico & Weed, 2006). However, for the most part, teachers are not given much in the way of guidance as to how to access these funds of knowledge. This paper provides a definition and explanation of funds of knowledge and offers several examples of successful ways funds of knowledge have been used in mainstream English Language Arts classrooms, particularly with regard to writing instruction. Teachers become students and culturally and linguistically diverse children become ‘experts’ in the classroom where funds of knowledge pedagogy is practiced. Implications for the classroom teacher are also discussed.

Introduction

The diverse nature of public school classrooms often presents a challenge to teachers who are invariably white middle class females. With a tightening economy, many school districts find themselves unable to provide sufficient resources in the form of English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers/programs, so the classroom teacher finds herself facing a class of students who range from near non-speakers to fluent speakers of English. She is expected to provide an adequate education to all, despite the fact that she may have students speaking several different languages in the classroom and she herself is fluent in only one…English. There are clearly some challenges to be overcome if she is to be successful in reaching out to and teaching all her students.

Egbert and Ernst-Slavit (2010) acknowledge the need for ESL teachers to understand and make connections to their students’ backgrounds, but admit that “it is harder to find descriptions of how this information is to be collected and used” (p. 40). Furthermore, at the pre-service level, teachers are often ill-prepared to best serve their ESL students. Some textbooks for Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) trainees do address the importance of utilizing students’ funds of knowledge and cite some examples of successful cases where funds of knowledge have been accessed and leveraged into rigorous academic learning (Díaz-Rico, 2004; Díaz-Rico & Weed, 2006). However, for the most part, teachers are not given much in the way of guidance as to how to access these funds of knowledge. And then there is the classroom teacher, described above, who has limited ESL support. How is it possible to access and connect to all our students’ backgrounds so that we may better teach them?

In this paper, I offer, as a small form of amelioration, the concept of utilizing students’ funds of knowledge, as well as some means of accessing and using student
funds of knowledge to enrich English Language Arts programs, with a particular focus on writing. I start with a description/discussion of funds of knowledge, followed by a discussion of some means of accessing and using them in the English Language Arts program. Finally, I discuss some implications for our teaching.

Funds of Knowledge

With the ever-growing emphasis on standardized testing, children only experience and are expected to become proficient in the dominant paradigm of knowledge (González & Moll, 2002). Utilizing funds of knowledge as a framework for pedagogical practice highlights the social and cultural knowledge and practices children, particularly culturally and linguistically diverse children, already have to offer, despite the devaluation of this knowledge in the school system. This social and cultural knowledge or “funds of knowledge,” a phrase used by Moll and Greenberg (1990), essentially refers to “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well being” (p. 323). Theoretically, the funds of knowledge approach is rooted in Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural and historical theories of learning, i.e., that learning is a social process and that we all learn from more experienced others. The funds of knowledge pedagogical approach assumes that all “people are competent and have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge” (González & Moll, 2002, p. 625). While González and Moll made this particular claim regarding high school students and their parents, they and others (cf., McIntyre, Rosebery, & González, 2001; Moll & González, 1994; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001) have focused their research and teaching efforts on younger children, particularly those that Eve Gregory (2008) calls new language learners (NLLs).

There is a considerable body of research which has shown that incorporating the funds of knowledge children bring with them into the curriculum has tended to increase the self-esteem and academic achievement of minority and lower socioeconomic class children by bridging gaps between school and home knowledge (Dworin, 2006; Gay 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lee, 1998; Lipka & McCarty, 1994; Olmedo, 1997; Rosebery, McIntyre, & González, 2001; Street, 2005). Furthermore, as Trumbull et al. (2001) report, by attending to the sense of belonging and well-being of the children in the classroom, which, in turn depends on developing respectful, conflict-free relationships with families, teachers see growth in student academic achievement (p. 133).

Literature that addresses students as researchers of cultural and linguistic artifacts (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1998; Egan-Robertson, 1998; Elmesky, 2005; Elmesky & Tobin, 2005; Montero-Sieburth, 1998; Schaafsma, 1998; Wigginton, 1985) strongly suggests that through inviting students to engage in authentic (i.e. beyond the school walls) research, students developed deeper, more relevant relationships with academic knowledge by tapping into the cultural and historical knowledge of their neighborhoods, family members, and friends. They simultaneously engaged with, created, and preserved cultural knowledge (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1998). In an effort to enable students to utilize their incredibly rich and diverse funds of knowledge in the classroom, Curry and Bloome (1998), for example, developed the Learning to Write by Writing Ethnography project; a project which, through the process of teaching fourth- and fifth-grade students how to conduct ethnographic research and write ethnographically, also engaged them in researching and legitimizing their community knowledge. In this case, according to
Bloome and Egan-Robertson (1998), students recreated themselves both as learners and as producers of knowledge as they transformed their classrooms into inquiry workshops and used what they learned about their communities to enhance their academic learning (Evans, 2010).

Olmedo (2009) describes a phenomenon she calls “border blending”, a modification of the metaphor of “border crossing” as popularized by Anzaldúa (1987). Border blending is a means of reaching across borders to acknowledge and validate both community and school realities – a means of helping children to “navigate in the spaces between the borders of language and culture” (p. 23). She cites code-switching as one means of border crossing and suggests that using the cultural and linguistic resources of children and communities to enhance children’s learning of English skills needed for success is an application of the use of funds of knowledge to blend borders.

**Accessing Student Funds of Knowledge**

In the original funds of knowledge research, interested teachers met with university researchers to learn first about conducting ethnographic research (González, 1995). Ethnographic research, typically associated with anthropological study, is the study of an ethnic group. The researcher spends time with the group being studied, observing and participating in cultural practices, recording information, and interviewing members of the group. Invariably, one or two members of the group become trusted informants for the researcher. Margaret Mead, for example, is one notable anthropological researcher who wrote *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928/2001), an ethnography of adolescent Samoan girls.

The concept of teachers spending time with students’ families and learning from them was a key element of the funds of knowledge project. Luis Moll, an educational researcher, and Norma González, an educational anthropologist, recruited and trained interested teachers from Tucson, Arizona, in ethnographical research methods, particularly the ethnographic interview. Teachers then approached families of the Mexican-American students they taught and were able to visit the homes of several of their students. It is critical to note that these were not typical home visits by the teachers. Rather, the teachers adopted the role of learners; that is, they emphasized that they wished to learn more about the families they visited, instead of telling families what they should do to better help their children succeed in school.

Over the course of the funds of knowledge project, teachers made three home visits, each time coming with a questionnaire to help guide discussion; first they wished to learn about family and labor history; second, they wished to learn about regular household activities; and finally, the third (often the most lengthy and revealing) visit was based on how parents and caretakers view parenthood, including thinking about how their (parents) school experiences compared with those of their children. Teachers took notes, wrote field notes and met with the researchers to discuss findings on a regular basis. These meetings served to “help mediate the participants’ comprehension of social life in the households they study” (González & Moll, 2002, p. 634). Clearly, from this brief description, one can see that time is a considerable element in accessing student funds of knowledge. However, as we’ll later see, such a time commitment need not be the case.

One outcome of the utilization of funds of knowledge as a pedagogical tool was an upswing in the use of the inquiry model of teaching in which students become active consumers and producers of knowledge, rather than passive receptors (Dworin, 2006;
Street, 2005). Other notable outcomes include identification and validation of the social and cultural knowledge of the students (Rosebery, McIntyre, & González, 2001), increased family and community involvement in schools, and teacher professional development (González & Moll, 2002). I now briefly describe some examples of how pedagogy based on funds of knowledge can be applied to the English Language Arts classroom.

**Funds of Knowledge Applications to English Language Arts**

*The Family Stories Project*

In his Family Stories Project, Joel Dworin (2006) worked with a group of fourth-grade Spanish and English speaking students. After sharing and discussing two stories about growing-up experiences of family members, the fourth graders were asked to have several family members share with them a story about growing up. Students were asked to select one of the stories they heard to write up and bring to class. The story had to be a true one.

In groups, the students shared, discussed, and revised their stories based upon feedback given by fellow group members. Often, based upon such feedback, students returned to the family member whose story they decided to write up to get more information or detail to satisfy the feedback they were getting from their fellow writers. Those whose stories the students were recounting were asked to verify (by signing drafts) that the story was accurately rendered. Stories were edited and students were paired up to translate each other’s story into English or Spanish (depending on the language the original story was written in). Once translations were completed, each student created an illustration that fit the story. Each document was then typed up and published in two books (*El gran libro de bellos recuerdos de nuestras familias* and *The Magnificent Book of Memories*).

*The Funds of Knowledge Writing Project*

Chris Street (2005) advocated the use of writing as a window into the funds of knowledge that culturally and linguistically diverse students frequently hide as they struggle with becoming familiar with the dominant culture of the classroom. He noted the difficulty secondary teachers, who may be responsible for a hundred or more students, have in making extended visits to students’ homes. By combining that difficulty with his research into writing attitudes, namely, that students are more interested in writing about topics of personal interest than they are writing about other topics, he developed the Funds of Knowledge Writing Project.

Street’s project enabled his students to write about the topics that interested them most, which allowed him to weave his students’ experiences into his educational practice. He reported that he “began to listen more and talk less, asking students what they knew and cared about….They became my teachers, allowing me a unique glimpse into their lives outside of school. In doing so, I found myself learning many important lessons about the cultural and familial resources of my students” (Street, p. 24). Above and beyond the benefits of having a class of urban adolescent writers engaged in their writing, Street reported a deepening of his relationship between himself and his students’ families. He noted that they approached him regarding “ways they could to use the school work of their children to enact positive changes in their own lives” (p. 24). Instead of being the “expert,” Street became the learner, thereby enacting Elbow’s (1990) claim for the need
to invest more authority in the student in order to enhance student learning. His work with students opened up new opportunities to work with both students and their families, thereby bridging home and school.

Contrasting Cultures

Sharon Maher (Maher, Epaloose, & Tharp, 2001) focused on her students’ writing skills in preparation for a state writing assessment as she planned a unit that contrasted Jewish culture with her students’ Zuni culture. A white teacher living in a Zuni pueblo “teacherage” for three years to that point, Maher realized her knowledge of Zuni ways was superficial, at best. However, she was not without resources; she had read up on Zuni culture, and had Zuni colleagues, but her greatest resource would be the Zuni students who populated her classroom. It’s important to note that, as with most Native American/First Nations peoples, the Zuni people experienced “subtractive schooling,” a process which “divests these youth of important social and cultural resources, leaving them progressively vulnerable to academic failure” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 3). Hence Maher was aware of an element of distrust between school and home in the Zuni pueblo. However, Maher’s plan was to engage students in instructional conversations (dialogue, questioning, and sharing of ideas and knowledge) as a prelude to having them write. With the assistance of her Zuni paraprofessional, she introduced the idea of culture and traditions by modeling and demonstrating (i.e., Maher sharing a traditional Irish meal, the paraprofessional discussing a display of bird feathers). Students responded in kind, sharing and displaying various cultural artifacts.

Maher then introduced the Jewish culture through the medium of the movie Fiddler on the Roof, a fictional work that illustrates elements of Jewish culture. Through instructional conversations, students were able to see similarities and disparities between the two cultures and were able to compose a paper comparing and contrasting the two cultures. Revision and editing were introduced and taught in a step-by-step manner reminiscent of Delpit’s (2002) focus in direct instruction for members of the non-dominant culture. Maher noted that by contrasting cultures, her students had “an opportunity to initiate discussions with their parents and grandparents, asking about the uses and meanings of artifacts and the differences between today and the times of their ancestors” (p. 24). In this case, she became a learner along with her students.

My Own Experiences

Prior to undertaking graduate studies, I spent approximately 12 years teaching in a small northern British Columbia community. The majority of the students I taught were of Tahltan First Nations ancestry. As with Maher’s Zuni students, the link between home and school was tenuous, due, mostly to the history of “subtractive schooling” (Valenzuela, 1999) mentioned above. The school in which I taught was a low performing school – the district was one of the lowest scoring districts in the Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA)², British Columbia’s provincial assessment program.

Middle school level English Language Arts was one of the subjects I taught at this school and writing was a topic that was resisted by many of the students, Tahltan and white alike. At the time, two elders from the Tahltan community (Grandma Shana and Grandma May³) spent time in the school teaching the Tahltan language. Students loved to
have the elders come into the classroom and these teachers from the community were often bombarded with requests to tell stories. Usually, the stories came once the language lesson part of the visit was completed. I noticed that the children were entranced by the folktales Grandma Shana and Grandma May told. These were stories of Wolf and Raven and were retold in both Tahltan and English. It seemed to me, at the time, that it would be instructionally valuable to tap into these stories in my English Language Arts class. I wondered how best to do that and decided to ask my students write the stories out, suggesting that we put them into a play format and perform them. The Tahltan students in my class were enthusiastic about the project and spent time talking with their elders and writing out the stories. We worked together to assemble a small collection of stories and I taught students how to re-write the stories in script form, leaving it up to groups to decide which ones to write up. Our goal was to perform the stories for our Tahltan teachers. Only one story was ready for performance by the end of the time allotted for the project and it was performed enthusiastically in the classroom for Grandmas Shana and May. Oddly enough, the group that succeeded in completing the project in time was the group that I thought would be least successful, as there were a couple of young boys who were struggling in school in that group.

In 2001, I started my Masters studies at the University of Utah and it was there that I discovered that what I’d done was to tap into my Tahltan students’ funds of knowledge, thereby accounting for the popularity of that particular writing project I’d undertaken with the students. It was clear to me that by becoming the learner and facilitating my students’ writing of the stories in both story and script form, I had bridged the school/home divide much as Street (2005), Dworin (2006), and Maher et al. (2001) had done with their students.

For my Masters thesis, I proposed collecting information about local plants useful to the Tahltan First Nations people and using that information to create a month long unit of school work that would combine Social Studies, Science, and English Language Arts into the study of local plant uses. In essence, I attempted to re-create the original “funds of knowledge for teaching” project (González, 1995). This project wasn’t quite as successful because I was in Salt Lake City and was relying on others to guide the students in their search for information about local indigenous plant uses. Nonetheless, the project had rich possibilities and a similar project, has been completed in that school district although not with the same First Nations group.

It seems clear, from the above examples, that utilizing the knowledge that culturally and linguistically diverse children have when they come to schools in the U.S. and Canada, while undervalued by our respective countries’ school systems, has the potential to enable such children to become more fully engaged in the learning of English Language Arts and to become “experts” in their fields. However, this has implications for teachers and it is those implications that I now discuss.

**Implications for Teaching**

When we talk of employing mainstreamed ESL children’s funds of knowledge to leverage academic learning in writing in the Language Arts, there are a number of implications and challenges that must be considered. Some of these relate to language use in the classroom, the role of the teacher, time management, and possibly dangerous assumptions that can be made.
First, as Mullock (2006) tells us, “an important feature of TESOL is knowing one’s students – their backgrounds, personalities, proficiency levels, strengths and weaknesses – and being able to adjust one’s teaching to suit their needs” (p. 63). This is true of all teachers, if we are to reach and teach all of the children entrusted to us. Knowing one’s students is one of the implications for teachers. When there are speakers of several different languages in the classroom, learning as much as possible about the students is complicated. A teacher may be familiar with another language, but most often classroom teachers are monolingual. How then, is the teacher to understand the spoken and written language of all the children in the classroom, for, as Gibbons (2002, 2009) and others suggest, new language learners should be allowed to use their native or home language in school?

In a similar vein, many of the studies I’ve drawn upon in this essay, including my experiences, describe using the funds of knowledge of one minority or culturally and linguistically diverse group of children, such as Mexican-American, African American or Aboriginal children (Curry & Bloome, 1998; González & Moll, 2002; Maher et al., 2001; Street, 2005). However, it is quite possible that there may be more than two language groups in a classroom (e.g., English, Spanish, and Chinese). The teacher interested in using children’s funds of knowledge must then be aware of and carefully consider what funds of knowledge they can ascertain and best utilize to maximize children’s school learning (Andrews & Yee, 2006).

The role of the teacher becomes a little more precarious when focusing on children’s funds of knowledge because there is a shift from the “teacher as knowledge dispenser” role to “teacher as knowledge receiver” role. Similarly, there is a shift from the “student as knowledge receiver” role to “student as knowledge dispenser” role. In all examples discussed above, the teachers became learners and the students and their families were the experts. Teachers interested in learning about and using their students’ funds of knowledge to develop classroom curriculum must be comfortable in relinquishing some curricular control. Furthermore, Moll and González (1994) note that teachers must also become comfortable with “teaching children how to exploit these resources [funds of knowledge] in their environment, how to become, through literacy, conscious users of the funds of knowledge available for their thinking and development.” (p. 453). With regard to writing in particular, Delpit (2002) reminds us that it is necessary, in writing instruction, to ensure that we are teaching all children the conventions of writing in the dominant culture. So we must not only be a learner of our children’s cultures, but also an expert in the conventions of the dominant paradigm with regard to writing. After all, both teachers and parents want our students/children to be successful.

Utilizing children’s funds of knowledge in the English Language Arts classroom may mean re-examining classroom routines and the time used for writing (Hedges, Cullen, & Jordan, 2010). Many writing and reading experts acknowledge that time spent writing is extremely beneficial for building reading skills (Kirby & Crovitz, 2013; Ray, 2006; Routman, 2005). Routman, in particular, indicates that “for our English language learners, who encounter much unfamiliar language even in beginning reading texts, the reading-writing integration is a necessity” (p. 120). It would seem then, that time spent working on writing skills would be time well spent in the elementary English Language Arts classroom.
Finally, in terms of assumptions, teachers need to be aware that cultural and linguistic diversity ought not to be trivialized in what James Banks (2004) refers to as the “heroes and holidays” approach; that is, celebrating important events or people of a culture and not digging deeper to access children’s life skills and expertise in areas outside of school-based knowledge. Coupled with the challenge of not trivializing cultural diversity is the challenge of acknowledging that community is not a static entity, nor do all members of a community hold the same customs and beliefs (Andrews & Yee, 2006).

Conclusions

Despite the challenges of utilizing children’s funds of knowledge in the English Language Arts program, particularly with the teaching of writing, the rewards can be impressive. Conteh and Brock (2011) tell us that “learning is about participating with others to engage with social and cultural tools in order to co-construct new meanings” (p. 350) and urge us to make our classrooms “safe spaces” where all learning experiences are recognized and valued, not just those of one culture. The key to developing those “safe spaces” lies in the relationships that are constructed between learners and educators. Hence, it is imperative that classroom teachers learn as much and as quickly as possible about the students in our classrooms.

I suggest that one way of doing so is to involve students in writing about those topics they know best – themselves, their cultures, their interests, their families. Narrative writing can be developed in this manner. If, as part of the English Language Arts program, we teach students to create questions and conduct interviews, then we position students as researchers, producers of knowledge, and their writing becomes informative in nature. Using the knowledge gained through our students’ investigations and writings about their funds of knowledge, we can teach them to compare and contrast cultural traditions, holidays, etc. (Maher et al., 2001). This can lead naturally into writing opinion pieces about cultural variants of similar stories or cross-cultural story-telling traditions. Most importantly, when we give children authentic writing opportunities such as learning about and using their funds of knowledge affords, we engender in them the desire to write more, thus building fluency (Kirby & Crovitz, 2013) in the target language. As Taylor (1993) reminds us, “[I]n developing educational opportunities for families, it is essential that we begin by learning about their lives so that together we can build meaningful connections between everyday learning and school learning” (p. 551). All the students we teach deserve nothing less.

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Footnotes

1Maher reports that non-Zuni teachers were housed in a compound adjacent to the school, separated from the rest of the pueblo. The pueblo provided the housing.

2The FSA is a test of reading, writing, and numeracy skills administered to fourth and seventh graders throughout British Columbia each school year. Information gathered by the FSA is analyzed and reported on provincial, district, and school levels and is reported as percent of students exceeding, meeting, or below grade level expectations. Most recently (2013), of the fourth graders tested in the school district I taught in, 50%, 60%, and 40% were not meeting fourth-grade reading, writing, and numeracy expectations respectively. These data apply to both all students and Aboriginal students. The seventh grade results are similar.

3Names are pseudonyms.