
Putting language back into language arts: When the radical middle meets the third space

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Abstract (Document Summary)

The concept of the radical middle is employed to create a (third) space that facilitates a more useful and fruitful conversation about the ways reading is taught in classrooms.

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[Headnote]

Under the leadership of Kris Gutierrez Language Arts will regularly publish articles that offer interdisciplinary perspectives on the themes around which each issue is organized. In this issue, Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, and Turner use the concept of the radical middle to create a (third) space where we can have more fruitful conversations about the ways reading is taught in our classrooms.

According to the Standards for the English Language Arts, (NCTE & IRA, 1996),

English language arts education involves the study of the systems and structures of language and of language conventions, including grammar, punctuation, and spelling. In addition to gaining competency in these aspects of language use, students need to understand how language conventions vary from one context to another. In other words, they need to know how to apply their knowledge of the systems and structures of language depending on the nature of the task at hand.... Language as it is used here encompasses visual communication in addition to spoken and written forms of expressions (NCTE/IRA, 1996, p. 2-16). Most educators when asked to define language arts invoke the traditional cornerstones of language arts instruction: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Some may add "thinking" as an additional skill, while others consider thinking to be an underlying process of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The usefulness of these definitions to language arts educators is unquestionable; however, as we rethink our current understandings and practices of language arts, we notice that what counts as language, both in theory and in classroom practice, has rarely been at the core of these discussions. Nor has there been significant discussion on the social and cognitive consequences of current language arts practices.

Focusing more on the component parts of language arts or instructional approaches, rather than on language and language learning, may have contributed to current debates that deconstruct language arts into binary categories. These categories, on the one hand, set up unresolvable tensions and, on the other, help construct curricular materials and pedagogical practices that adhere to rigid ideological stances about language instruction. Debates that occupy much of the current public discourse generally center on the merits of instructional approaches and strategies, rather than debating about how children actually learn language and acquire literacies (Colvin, 1996; Harste & Short, 1996). Other debates are motivated by ideological stances regarding the politics of language use. For example, more regional or local debates such as those around the role and exclusive use of standard English versus local dialects or registers and the debates on monolingualism versus bilingualism are increasingly moving to the center of discussion (Anderson, 1997). While we recognize that these debates are most often fueled by political, economic, or religious views and sociohistorical conditions, we want to refocus discussion on the centrality of language as the target of instruction and as a tool for learning. The arena for this discussion, then, becomes the learning community, and the focus is on those who have the most at stake in these debates, students and teachers.

In this article, we present a theoretical view on literacy in which the role of language is understood as part of and inseparable from the sociocultural context. This view highlights the interconnectedness of language, culture, and learning. We use sociocultural theory as a tool to help us make sense of these connections. From this perspective, individuals use language to communicate a variety of meanings in different contexts where they exist both as individuals and as members of communities. Language is a tool for social interaction and, thus, indexes or signals particular identities and membership in groups (Rogoff,1990; Cole,1996; Ochs,1992; Gee,1990). Language is also a tool we use to express and make sense of our experience; it is a tool that transforms our thinking (Vygotsky, 1978; 1986; Wertsch, 1985). Thus, language is fundamental to the constitution of self and is at the core of our social, emotional, and cognitive experiences.

In contrast to more traditional views of literacy as rulegoverned, monolingual, and monocultural, we consider language use to be situated and central to the acquisition of multiple discourses, as well as other community-specific literacies. Following the New London Group (1996), we argue for a "pedagogy of multiliteracies" (p. 64). Becoming literate from this perspective includes learning in ways that ensure that students participate fully in public, community, and economic life. Literacy, then, includes developing both linguistic and sociocultural knowledge about language and its uses. Like other language researchers, we recognize that we are socialized to multiple literacies and that literacy learning extends beyond the classroom.

While grounded in this view, we are mindful of being theory-informed and not theory-driven and of grounding our understandings of language and literacy learning in particular classroom communities. As Kenneth Burke has said, "A way of seeing is also a way of not seeing" (as quoted in Rose, 1984, p. xvi). We hope the situated or contextualized view we employ contributes to reflexive and thoughtful practice and does not permit even our most dear practices and beliefs to become gospel. It is from this perspective that we have studied the relationship between language and literacy in urban classrooms.

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY LEARNING

Language learning is a process of socialization in which the child and adult are both active agents. Across contexts, including the home and school, children are socialized to use language, as well as socialized through language (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986), or as others suggest, they learn language, they learn about language, and they learn through language (Halliday, 1977; 1978; Egan-Robertson & Bloome, in press; Yeager, Floriani, & Green, in press). Like members of all communities, elementary school children develop particular ways of interacting, using language, and demonstrating newly acquired knowledge from successive interactions with more competent others (e.g., peers, teachers, and parents). In this way, language learning and literacy skills emerge not only in but through joint or collaborative activity in their various communities. Thus, students' conceptions of language, literacy, and culturally appropriate ways of "doing literacy" in school contexts are influenced by the experiences they bring to school, their previous instructional settings, and the ongoing activities that teachers and students construct in classrooms.

From a sociocultural perspective, children develop, acquire, and are socialized to various literacies, as they actively participate in culturally defined systems of practices such as participating in religious education classes, playing sports or games, and participating in formal and non-formal schooling activities (Baquedano-Lopez, in press; Cole, 1996; Goodwin, 1990; Heath, 1991; Turner,1997). In these contexts, interaction and language are the vehicles for bringing together what novices and experts or "newcomers" and "old-timers" know. Here we mean that both teachers and students can be both experts and novices at different points in time and across many situations (Gutierrez & Stone, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990). In the context of literacy learning, students acquire knowledge as they assume increasingly complex roles in activities with others. Note, however, that this view of literacy learning does not mean that learning language or becoming literate is a process of linearly moving through stages of learning or through sequential roles. Nor do we mean that instructional materials or tasks must be simplified into discrete skills and sub-tasks. Instead, we believe children's literacy development is related to their access to various kinds of learning activities that require a range of ways of participating and using language to achieve competence. Literacy learning, then, can be understood as change in participation in a variety of essential roles in increasingly complex learning events (Gutierrez & Stone, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990).

We recognize that there are many ways of participating in literacy practices and of scaffolding or assisting learning. Of interest is the particular kind of assistance or co-participation that provides students opportunities to construct jointly new ways of using language and participating. When teachers, students, and peers engage in tasks collaboratively, their knowledge and literacies become available to one another. Co-participation in a variety of literacy practices provides students opportunities to jointly construct new ways of using language and participating. Co-participation in everyday routines or activities provides opportunities for learning the language(s) of the classroom, as well as the social and linguistic goals of the larger community Becoming literate, then, requires learning both linguistic and grammatical forms (language skills) and sociocultural forms and functions (when and how to use these language skills) of the learner's various discourse communities. This framing of literacy as cognitive activity and sociocultural practice highlights the essential link between language, culture, and learning and can help move us beyond unproductive debates in which successful language arts practice is characterized by a single solution or a narrow understanding of literacy and language. From this perspective, we discuss some current language arts practices we believe warrant reconsideration.

CURRENT PRACTICES

Current public debates about language arts can be challenged not only on theoretical but on empirical grounds. The rhetoric of these debates fails to acknowledge the diversity of classrooms by assuming they are monolithic sites. Each classroom community establishes particular kinds of repertoires for action, interaction, and language (Gutierrez, 1993). Moreover, all classrooms construct normative patterns of classroom life or scripts that become resources that members draw upon to define what counts as literacy and appropriate literate behaviors (cf. Gutierrez, 1993). Thus, classrooms are sites of alternative, hybrid, or even conflicting practices and beliefs. The source of the tensions is looking at learners, teachers, and learning contexts from one point of view. For example, teachers may be encouraged to adopt the current curriculum mandated by local district and state policies, often without consideration of what it means to implement curricular policies and practices in context. Perhaps, the source of the tensions evident in classroom practices lies in looking at language learners, teachers, and learning contexts without consideration of their interconnectedness. This "decontextualized" practice often leads teachers to develop and draw from a narrow theoretical and pedagogical repertoire of resources and may lead them to rely on a single approach to address a variety of language needs, or, alternatively, to use multiple strategies that may not cohere theoretically or pedagogically Current language arts practices fall along a continuum of approaches, and each practice is diverse in its instantiation. Yet, language arts practices cluster around several ways of conceptualizing language arts instruction: a) a uni-dimensional "one size fits all" approach to literacy instruction (Reyes, 1992), or b) a hybrid or eclectic ("mix and match") approach that draws from various instructional and theoretical orientations.

One Size Fits All

At one extreme end of literacy instruction there is an overemphasis on teaching students the conventional features of writing (i.e., standard usage, grammar, spelling, and the mechanics of written language), and on teaching the traditional components of reading instruction (i.e., phonics, word attack skills, and vocabulary). Instruction in this perspective is characterized by a preponderance of teachercentered activities in which knowledge is transmitted from teacher to student or by highly individualized instruction. In either case, there is infrequent opportunity for students, their peers, and teachers to construct literacy knowledge together. This view of literacy learning as a highly individualized activity often defines literacy learning as a problem requiring educational approaches that separate learning from its context and the individual from the resources of her diverse community of peers.

At the other end of the instructional spectrum are literacy practices that exaggerate the benefits of discovery learning across tasks or attempt to be so student-centered that explicit instruction of literacy skills and strategies is rarely considered appropriate or useful. These practices do not recognize the benefits of strategically planned explicit instruction to meet the range of linguistic needs of all children. A focus on process to the exclusion of skills instruction may limit students' opportunities to resolve (or negotiate) the tensions resulting from discontinuities between ways of knowing, talking, writing, and interacting in and out of school, especially among linguistically-diverse students (Delpit, 1988; Gutierrez, 1995; Reyes, 1992). In other words, strategic and contextualized skills instruction, or situated practice, can provide students with opportunities for moving in and out of various discourse communities (New London Group, 1996).

We may find other language arts approaches that cut across the instructional spectrum described above that focus predominantly on the linguistic character of the learner. The goals of these instructional practices range from helping students to become fully bilingual and biliterate to acquiring Standard English, to the exclusion of other registers and codes. While we believe that the former approach is clearly beneficial to students, the latter results in literacy instruction that privileges Standard English language arts. This narrowly conceived instructional approach focuses exclusively on the learning of Standard English and eliminates the potential benefits of what Reyes (1997) calls linguistically accessible pedagogy, that is, an inclusive and understandable pedagogy National data suggest that over 70% of language arts instruction provided to language minority students relies on Standard English as the only medium of instruction and is dominated by practices designed to overcome English language deficits (Garcia, 1997). These practices run counter to the recommendations of the NCTE/IRA Standards document in which instruction in language arts means language education and the development of "mothertongue and other-tongues or discourses" (Edelsky, personal communication, March 12, 1997). As Cook-Gumperz and Keller-Cohen (1993) have argued, classrooms should be places where multiple voices are heard, rather than places where a single language is privileged.

Narrowly conceived literacy practices are exacerbated by contexts of learning characterized by a single discourse and language, and by a single pattern of interaction discourse, and activity The social organization of learning in these contexts (how learning is organized and how knowledge is distributed) limits the range of activities, roles, and language uses that can occur in learning communities. In classrooms where the social organization of learning and language use is narrowly constructed, members have fewer linguistic, social, and cognitive resources from which to draw.

The public discourse of extreme practice, however, is often inconsistent with private practice (what teachers actually do in the classroom). Not only do some teachers employ singular approaches to meet broad educational and linguistic student needs, other teachers also may use a variety of activities, materials, and theories to implement their language arts program.

Mix and Match

An eclectic or "mix and match" approach to literacy instruction within and across classrooms has been documented (Gutierrez, 1993; 1995; Gutierrez, Larson, & Kreuter, 1995; Larson & Peckham, 1997). In their attempts to meet the diverse linguistic, social, and academic needs of students, teachers select and utilize a wide range of activities that may be informed by several competing theories of language learning. We observed that teachers draw from a wide set of practices because they recognize the needs of individual students. However, there are consequences when classroom literacy practices are incongruent and do not match current understandings of how students learn language. These idiosyncratic literacy practices may create disjointed curricula and classroom cultures that fail to make normative literacy practices evident for students, thus, to use as resources for learning.

The consequences of an idiosyncratic curriculum cannot be overstated. Even though learning occurs in many individual classroom lessons, such learning can be limited. Despite the documented effectiveness of many individual classroom lessons, an idiosyncratic approach to literacy instruction that relies on using a set of prefabricated (or minimally altered) strategies or skill-building and processoriented activities may not strategically tailor instruction to meet both the individual and collective needs of the learning community. (Note that we make a distinction between highly individualized literacy instruction, as opposed to instructional contexts that acknowledge the individual's resources and learning needs as part of a larger social milieu.) The use of commodified literacy pedagogies makes it more difficult for the individual histories and practices of each particular classroom community to develop in ways that do not homogenize learners either linguistically, culturally, or cognitively.

Many teachers who combine different kinds of lessons, programs, approaches, and theories of language learning identify their practice and orientation as eclectic. The use of this label is both interesting and troubling to us. The term "eclectic" in most contexts connotes a positive strategy. In the case of teaching, it should suggest a strategic use of a range of practices. However, the use of the term "eclectic" to describe teachers' actual practice often does not illustrate the kind of reflexive and strategic practice we propose later in this article. A more serious consequence is that this label might actually serve as the rationale for an unreflective or unsystematic combining of practices (Freedman, 1994).

In our experience many teachers reside in this "eclectic" instructional space and with good reason (Gutierrez, 1992). The marketplace has powerfully entered the world of teachers, providing them with a wide array of instructional materials, approaches, and activities that espouse, both implicitly and explicitly, a less than strategic combination of theories and practices. It is not surprising, then, that teachers, working in conditions that do not allow nor promote thoughtful practice, find this eclecticism to be the most effective in meeting the needs of their diverse student populations, especially in overcrowded environments (Reyes, 1992).

The consequences of a mix and match approach to literacy instruction are significant. An idiosyncratic approach to teaching and learning often does not draw strategically from the lived experiences and linguistic, social, and intellectual resources of the participants; thus, normative literacy practices are often imported and imposed, rather than emerging from the sociocultural history of each classroom. An "eclectic" instructional space with these pret-a-porter (ready to wear) practices can be a constraining and less productive space for both teachers and students. Consider, for example, what one educator recounted about his initial school experience as a Spanish-only speaker in a classroom that illustrates the consequences of using an assortment of ready-made materials and practices that do not value and make use of children's linguistic and cultural knowledge:

I came to kindergarten so excited and ready to learn. I came prepared with my maleta (suitcase) full of so many wonderful things, my Spanish language, my beautiful culture, and many other treasures. When I got there, though, not only did they not let me use anything from my maleta, they did not even let me bring it into the classroom (quoted in Gutierrez & Larson,1994, p. 33).

This retrospective narrative illustrates the potential cognitive and social consequences of classroom practices that exclude maletas and their treasures. Rather than excluding maletas, classrooms should create contexts for learning that lead to full participation in the literacy learning process (New London Group, 1996).

THE RADICAL MIDDLE: MOVING TOWARD THE THIRD SPACE

Like all cultural practices, schooling practices also evolve and change in synchrony with the imminent changes experienced at given sociohistorical moments, across academic disciplines, institutions, and communities. Consequently, as we noted above, even our most dear beliefs and practices are transformed in their enactment in classroom activitysometimes despite our resistance. In fact, increasingly, many classrooms are more effective than ever before (Edelsky, 1990; 1991; Rose, 1995). While we have observed such effective practice, especially in the best examples of what can be conceived of as what is labeled whole language, we believe that language and literacy learning, even in the best classrooms, can be improved (Gutierrez, 1992; 1993).

We have observed learning environments informed by sociocultural understandings of language and literacy learning. In these settings, there is a shift in foci from teaching to learning, from individuals to collectives, from classrooms to communities, and from habitual to reflexive practice. These teachers are more theory-informed and socioculturally aware (Freedman, 1994; Gutierrez & Stone, 1997; Rose, 1995). Teachers who understand how children learn and use language in the development of literacies, derive their knowledge from a variety of sources and experiences. They may be part of formally organized teaching communities such as writing and literature projects, whole language groups, or locally-organized reading groups. Other teachers may acquire knowledge through their individual praxis or practice and their own examined understandings of classroom life. Yet others may read volumes of books and journals to extend their own knowledge (Rose, 1995). A characteristic common to these teachers is their continued search for better practice and for deeper understandings of the relationships between language, culture, and learning. These teachers move away from the extremes, the idiosyncratic, and/or the singular model, towards a more radical and thoughtful middle. We have observed that these teachers employ a more dynamic and situated view of language and literacy learning.

A more robust view of the role of language and literacy learning in the classroom calls for a decisive move away from the oppositional discourses set up by the pedagogical debates mentioned above to a more dynamic center, or what Pearson (1996) and Pearson and Johnson (1978) have called the "radical middle" and a move toward what we have called the "third space" (Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995). While we recognize that these two concepts are grounded in different, yet compatible theoretical orientations, we use the notion of the radical middle as a first step in constructing the third space. As we have discussed elsewhere, the third space in learning environments refers to a place where two scripts or two normative patterns of interaction intersect, creating the potential for authentic interaction and learning to occur. This is a new sociocultural terrain in which a space for shifts in what counts as knowledge and knowledge representation is created (Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995). To achieve the third space a new pedagogical orientation must be developed. We use the notion of the "radical middle" to illustrate this orientation.

The "radical middle" we propose is not a compromising, liberal, and comfortable middle or a "balanced" curriculum, but rather a new theoretical and pedagogical space in which learning takes precedence over teaching; instruction is consciously local, contingent, situated, and strategic; and our current knowledge about language learning and language users informs the literacy curriculum. We believe that teaching in the radical middle will be an important first step in both conceptualizing and constructing new learning communities.

Our intention here is both to problematize current debates on language arts practice, and to challenge practitioners to move towards a more constructive view of learning spaces. To assist teachers in reconceptualizing classroom literacy practices, we offer the following discussion of several key features for teaching in the radical middle and, ultimately, in the third space: language; the social organization of learning; and, curriculum and pedagogy. These components, however, are not discrete; rather, they are interrelated and interdependent.

Language

In this new instructional space, language is consciously at the center of learning. As such, language is more than a set of rules for communication. It forms an "identity kit" and signals membership in particular groups (Gee, 1990). These identity kits include our linguistic codes and registers (e.g., dialects, oral and written texts, narratives) that serve as resources to accomplish a variety of literacy tasks and facilitate participation within and across various communities (Dyson, 1997). Thus, instruction in the radical middle may be more productive if it utilizes the linguistic resources and conventions of both the individual student and the repertoires of the larger community

The Social Organization of Learning

Instruction in the radical middle has a high potential for restructuring the organization and experiences of learning for all children, and may be particularly productive for urban classrooms with heterogeneous student populations. Language arts teachers in such contexts recognize classrooms as dynamic, interactional spaces and recognize the relationship between what students can learn and the literacy and discourse practices of the classroom. We have noted that these teachers attend to several important features of the instructional environment to enhance literacy (and biliteracy) learning. First, they pay attention to the ways knowledge is organized and distributed in classroom literacy practices so that it is accessible to all members of the learning community. To accomplish this, the normative practice of these classrooms includes the strategic use of more than one instructional script and varied discourse practices; for example, both explicit instruction and small group work may be utilized depending on the needs of the students and the instructional goal. Most often explicit instruction is in the form of mini-lessons, and small group work, in which knowledge is both constructed by and distributed among the participants. Learning, then, is facilitated by both guided participation and strategic instruction (Gutierrez & Stone, 1997; Rogoff, 1990; Rogoff, Radziszewska, & Masiello, 1995; Stone, 1996).

Clearly, how learning is organized is part of any pedagogical and curricular approach. We make a distinction in the discussion that follows to help illustrate the point that what is taught in language arts activities and how it is taught are related to what is learned.

Curriculum and Pedagogy

The curriculum of this new instructional space is best characterized as respectful in that it utilizes the rich potential of the students and necessarily creates rigorous curricula that both challenge and scaffold students' learning (Rose, 1995). Thus, the social practices in these classroom communities authenticate, integrate, and connect the classroom literacy practices to the practices of the students' various communities. In this way, students' language and cultural knowledge become tools for learning. Language arts activities conceptualized and practiced in ways that draw upon children's linguistic and sociocultural knowledge this way maximize the potential for students to assume various roles and expertise in the course of literacy learning.

These various roles assume asymmetrical relations, such as those between experts and novices, to organize and facilitate learning. However, the complexity of the concept of asymmetry requires some discussion. While asymmetry between learners, including the teacher, can foster the type of learning against which we have been arguing, it can also facilitate several outcomes: a) experts (both students and teachers) can assist individual and group members to accomplish tasks that novices could not do alone; and b) experts and novices can work together to understand concepts and accomplish tasks more effectively than they could working independently (Vygotsky, 1978; 1986). This is not to say that teachers have no place in the radical middle or in the third space; indeed, teachers can and should exercise authority, without becoming authoritarian. In this way, the responsibility for organizing this new learning context falls heavily, although not exclusively, on the teacher whose role it is to guide students strategically through the learning process.

Differences in levels of experience are evident and even necessary across many literacy learning situations; however, this does not mean that the teacher must be the only linguistic and cultural broker in the classroom. A more community-centered context not only recognizes the important roles both students and teachers must have in learning processes, but also organizes literacy learning so that shifts and changes in roles and varied uses of literacy knowledge (for both students and teachers) are commonplace. The dynamic nature of the roles of teacher and student, and of novice and expert, is the centerpiece of this pedagogy

Thus far, we have consciously used the term literacy learning rather than literacy instruction. We do this to emphasize the point that classrooms moving toward the third space focus on learning rather than on teaching. This shift from teaching to learning requires literacy practices that turn the following into resources for literacy learning: a) the children's and classroom language(s); b) cultural knowledge; and c) the everyday practices of the classroom. We provide examples of how this shift takes place in two different learning environments.

Constructing the Third Space: A Vignette

In one two-way Spanish immersion classroom we studied, students were not segregated by language use or language ability, even though they came from distinct socioeconomic and linguistic backgrounds. This second/third grade classroom and school population drew heavily from the less affluent surrounding Latino community, while more affluent European-American and middle-class African-American parents from other communities also elected to enroll their children in this school community This particular classroom community was open and flexible to behaviors that might be considered inappropriate in other classrooms (e.g., student-to-student talk or spontaneous sharing and assistance among students). Talk and interaction and reading and writing here were considered the means to productive learning. Moreover, the teacher and the children placed a high value on respecting the language, social practices, and beliefs of the classroom community and its individual members. Thus, lessons included listening to the teacher's mini-lectures, reading and writing texts (both fiction and non-fiction), and participating in numerous discussions in Spanish and English, based on questions students had generated.

The day-to-day practices of this bilingual classroom provided multiple opportunities for students to have continuous access to each other's linguistic, cultural, and cognitive resources and, thus, had consequences that extended beyond the classroom walls. Triggered by an incident where a student had called another student a "homo," and followed by a series of student questions about homosexuality and the human body, this combined second/ third-grade class decided they wanted to learn about the human reproductive system. Given the age of the children and the topic (an area formally addressed in higher grades), the teacher designed a sophisticated and age-appropriate unit that involved parental and district approval and participation.

Language as Resource

As the children learned about the fertilization process and the early stages of human development, the teacher made conscious use of the children's everyday language or vernacular in both English and Spanish to accomplish several goals: a) to help children gain a better understanding of the forms and uses of their own language and concepts; b) to legitimize their own words and their local knowledge; c) to link local ways of knowing to formal classroom knowledge; and d) to learn and utilize new vocabulary, concepts, and content related to human development. All of these goals were accomplished, for example, when the teacher incorporated the various ways the children talked about the female breast, including particular cultural meanings and uses attached to it. The range of word choices children used to refer to the female breast (chichi, pecho, busto) became the means with which to discuss the range of knowledge they had about the breast and the appropriate context of use for these terms.

Cultural Knowledge as Resource

In the same activity for example, the teacher was responsive to the cultural sensitivity of the topic, particularly for the Latino children who do not generally use these terms in the official space of the classroom; such terms are relegated to side conversations among peers, and are rarely used for classroom learning. The teacher, herself a Latina, anticipated the children's potential discomfort and embarrassment and legitimized the giggles and slight hesitancy students had in discussing subjects such as the female breast. Thus, by minimizing their anxiety, students eagerly utilized their own knowledge and language and actively participated in the discussion. In this way, their cultural knowledge was foregrounded and formed the foundation for subsequent learning.

Sociocultural Practice as Resource

The everyday practices of the classroom (the sociocultural practices) can also serve as resources for learning. Language and cultural knowledge, then, were not only resources for learning in this classroom, but they became the vehicles for building new social practices both in and outside the school. In the course of studying the human reproductive system, children developed new ways of talking about and interacting with one another around this topic. Now, for example, students could participate in formal lessons about the functions of the organs of the human body or they could collaborate in various whole class or small group activities (those both formally and informally constituted). As their participation in learning activities increased, their roles, language use, and literacy skills also shifted. Their expertise on this subject allowed them to share their knowledge outside the classroom and in their homes. Discussions about human reproduction became part of family talk and this talk, in turn, frequently became part of the classroom conversation. In this way, the social practices of both classroom and home were influenced. The most dramatic example came from a young mother who thanked and tearfully confided to the teacher that this unit not only created opportunities for substantive conversations with her daughter but also that these conversations gave her access to knowledge that she herself lacked about her own adult body

As this vignette illustrates, residing in this instructional space can be productive, engaging, yet difficult for both teachers and students. Initially, these are contested spaces; in other words, these are spaces where languages, registers, beliefs, and practices may compete and create tensions among individuals or groups. However, these tensions may be productive-if they become the means through which richer linguistic, sociocultural, and content knowledge is created. In these spaces, then, teachers and students must be conscious of how they use language both individually and collectively, as well as the consequences and potential of its use. For example, by recognizing the richness of the linguistic repertoires available in the classroom, the teacher described in the vignette helped construct a multi-voiced community. In this classroom, students were learning languages and registers, and they were using them to learn. As children developed expertise, they became knowledge brokers beyond the classroom walls.

Non-formal Learning Communities

The concept of the radical middle and the third space are not limited to formal learning contexts such as those found in schools. In fact, the potential for reaching these pedagogical spaces is heightened in non-formal learning contexts such as after-school programs, or youth and community organizations. Often these learning environments are not constrained by the features and beliefs of traditional school settings. In our ongoing studies of non-formal schooling activities we have found examples of dynamic interactions where new, untraditional spaces are created that illustrate how contexts for learning can be engaging, challenging, and productive.

We offer the example of a university-school-community partnership that has created an urban educational project for linguistically- and culturally-diverse students to develop literacy, problem-solving, and mathematical and scientific skills through joint participation in computer-mediated activity (Nicolopoulou & Cole, 1993). Our site, Las Redes (Networks), is part of a system-wide project where undergraduates of the University of California observe and assist children's participation in activities at an after-school computer club in an urban school that serves a large population of both Latino and African-American students. At the university, undergraduate students enroll in a course that prepares them theoretically and pedagogically to interact with a diverse group of children. At the school site, elementary school children (K-8) and undergraduate students engage in a variety of language activities, including bilingual (SpanishEnglish) language games, problem solving and board games, phonics, and electronic mail writing activities. In this way, the children have ongoing opportunities to problem-solve, theorize, and experiment with language and thinking with a more expert other, including peers, adults, and parents.

This after-school computer club is is not a typical learning community, especially for urban school children. So we were not surprised to witness children's creative efforts to gain entry and membership in this limited and relatively small-scale project (50 students out of a 1200 student body population). Martha, a fourth-grade student who had not been originally selected as a participant in this heterogeneous after-school club, figured out a way to enter the club unnoticed. By using the name tag of another young girl named Martha, this Martha attended the club on those days that the official Martha did not. Her initiative and problemsolving strategies were rewarded with official admission to the after-school club. Another student, who so valued her participation in the program but who, nevertheless, had to move out of the area, devised ways to remain in the program by enlisting her grandmother to transport her from her new school to Las Redes. These examples illustrate children's attachment to and value for the learning and interaction in this non-formal setting. But such interactions and feelings do not just happen. This site is an intercultural site where multiple identities and languages merge in the context of learning. Language choice is prevalent in this hybrid bilingual and multi-dialectical after-school setting (Vasquez, 1997). Thus, it is not just the lure of the computer games or the novelty of the program, but how learning is organized and how language facilitates this learning.

In this context, both the children and the undergraduates readily shift roles (from novice to expert) to assist one another in achieving various tasks; in this way, they can utilize one another as resources for learning and accomplishing new tasks. Specifically, the activities provide opportunities to bridge university and local knowledges and to be used as resources. The activities of Las Redes also expand the day for children to have access to knowledge in more informal and productive ways. Just like the vignette of the Spanish-immersion classroom we discussed earlier, participants at Las Redes draw from a larger set of linguistic tools and forms of social interaction. We believe the learning in this setting illustrates a move toward the third space.

For example, in a one typical interaction at Las Redes, Ricardo, a fourth-grade Latino boy, has just successfully completed a computer game at the after-school club. He invites Michelle, a European American university undergraduate who is spending her first day at the school site, to control the next game of Roundup the Rhinos. In this computer game, two rhinos are hidden behind a grid of 25 squares in a jungle-like scene. The game requires a series of problem-solving strategies in which players must locate two rhinos hidden behind the grid. The following example illustrates how spaces for learning can be created when language use, language choice, and the learning roles are flexible and dynamic. In the course of their interaction, it becomes evident that Ricardo has more expert knowledge than does Michelle. Ricardo initially invites Michelle to play by asking, "Wanna try it once?" Initially, however, Michelle is hesitant about taking on the role of player and she interjects, "Do I want to try it once?" But soon recognizes that Ricardo can facilitate her understanding of how to play the computer game and that Ricardo can actually learn by assisting her. Ricardo not only displays his expertise as game player by scaffolding Michelle's understanding of the game, he helps Michelle develop a strategy for playing the game by describing the consequences of each potential move. Michelle then acknowledges his expertise by asking him where to start, "Okay, so where should I start?" In his role of expert, Ricardo draws from his multiple experiences as player, as novice learner, and as more expert other. In the register of a fourth-grader, Ricardo uses language and gestures to guide Michelle through the various options available to her. For example, by pointing at strategic locations on the screen and explaining consequences for each move, he displays an understanding of both the game and Michelle's capabilities as novice player. Figure 1 illustrates this interaction. Roles and knowledge are not bound in this non-formal setting and thus at different times Michelle and Ricardo move freely in and out of expert and novice roles.

Note how Ricardo, by pointing out specific locations on the screen, guides Michelle's participation and assists her in selecting possible moves. Roles, language, and knowledge are not bound in this non-formal setting and, thus, at different times Michelle and Ricardo move freely in and out of expert and novice roles to accomplish the task and learn from one another. This example illustrates how literacy learning in this culture of collaboration provides students access to different forms of information, including multimedia technologies such as those utilized at Las Redes (New London Group, 1996; Nicolopoulou & Cole, 1993).

RETHINKING LANGUAGE ARTS

Enlarge 200%
Enlarge 400%

Figure 1. Child as expert.

[Photograph]
Figure 1.

If our goal is to help students make meaning across their various interactions and communities, we need to understand that language instruction should provide students with frequent opportunities both to use and develop an expansive repertoire of literacy skills and behaviors. Through participation in the third space, children can develop a tool kit, that is, a set of linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural tools and practices, that enhance learning. This tool kit, much like the kindergartner's maleta, reflects one's linguistic, sociocultural, and institutional identities-past, present, and potential.

Our goal for learning communities, both formal and non-formal, then, is to recognize that, as members of multiple, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting communities, we are always in a process of translation. To be in the process of translation means to be able to negotiate the linguistic and sociocultural borders of communities (Hall, 1994; Rushdie, 1992; Vasquez, Pease-Alvarez, & Shannon, 1994). Thus, learning communities, like those in the third space, require moving away from pedagogical and ideological extremes, or from idiosyncratic and non-strategic practice to enable students and teachers to become linguistic and cultural brokers. These communities and their practices can serve as potential resources with which members can negotiate their day-to-day interactions both in and outside the classroom.

In conclusion, while we present examples that illustrate a particular view of literacy instruction and even label this perspective, we are mindful of the consequences of being theoretically and pedagogically rigid. We offer the notion of the third space as but one example of a radical move away from the extremes. We conclude by emphasizing the vitality of literacy practices grounded in knowledge of language and language users and practices that are consciously local, contingent, situated and, above all, strategic.

[Footnote]
Notes

[Footnote]
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