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Kathryn Nielson-Dube
Merrimack College

Diane McEachern
University of Alaska Fairbanks

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Cultural Border Crossing: An Exploration of Power, Positionality, and Pedagogy in Context

Kathryn Nielsen-Dube, Merrimack College, USA
Diane McEachern, University of Alaska Fairbanks, USA

“Professors [or those] who embrace the challenge of self-actualization will be better able to create pedagogical practices that engage students, providing them with ways of knowing that enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply.” ~ bell hooks

Abstract: *This paper explores literature drawn from interdisciplinary scholarship that speaks to positionality as it applies to the complex dynamics of intercultural border crossing through the lens of two distinctly different institutional contexts – an adult service learning partnership at a private, Northeastern college and an indigenous adult cohort university program.*

Introduction

Scholars in the adult learning field continue to inform research and pedagogical methods of dialogue, empowerment and participatory processes that speak in holistic terms to disenfranchised populations. For example, Freire’s (1998) “dialogic model,” Shor’s (1992) “empowering education,” Brookfield’s (1986) analysis of “community action learning groups,” Cranton’s (2006) model of “transformative learning,” and Vella’s (2008) “learning-centered design” remain foundational to current theoretical approaches that are less alienating to those who come from immigrant and indigenous communities. Drawing on research from the fields of Adult Learning, New Literacy Studies, International Social Work, and Indigenous Studies our work focuses on theories that serve to underlie and inform the development of effective reflective practices, strategies, and guidelines in adult education. For the purpose of helping students and teachers develop epistemological skills vital to the mission of promoting 21st century inter/cross cultural attunement; our research underscores the importance of reflecting upon one’s positionality.

A Few Words on Positionality

According to David Takacs (2003), “to be able to identify assumptions that you take as universal truths but which, instead, have been crafted by your own unique identity and experiences in the world” remains quite a difficult task for most people – students and teachers alike. For the purposes of helping students and teachers to develop the skills to understand how they “know what [they] know,” Takacs rejects the banking model of education in favor of adopting a dialogic and reflective pedagogy and asserts, further, that understanding how positionality affects every day lived experience remains an interdisciplinary function, a vital key to lifelong learning, and contributes to the goals of liberatory pedagogy. Robertson (2002) states that it has become convention that “good” ethnographic research involves reflexivity, which she describes as the “capacity of any system of signification, including a human being...to turn back upon or to mirror itself.” In this regard, Robertson warns scholars and practitioners engaged in fieldwork to be aware of self-stereotyping that can occur during the reflexive examination of

one's positionality. Increasingly, ethnographic researchers are using concepts regarding positionality and power to better understand insider/outsider dynamics (Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, Lee, Kee, Ntseane, and Muhamad, 2001). Further, according to Jacobs-Huey (2002), reflexive practices enable researchers and practitioners "armed with the theoretical perspectives of their discipline" to interrogate how their biases and cultural assumptions affect what they see, hear, know, and write as they navigate cultural border crossing.

Positionality Through the Lens of New Literacy Studies

Freire's participatory work, alongside ethnographic scholarship on literacy in the 1980s, paved the way for the emergence of New Literacy Studies, a growing body of interdisciplinary research that explores and expands higher educational notions of academic literacies. New Literacy Studies (NLS), a social constructivist approach, argues for a contextualized, inclusive, and social approach to literacy. Street (2003) suggests that "in practice literacy varies from one context to another and from one culture to another and so, therefore, do the effects of the different literacies in different conditions." NLS theorists and practitioners opt for an ideological model of literacy that is culturally sensitive recognizing not only the cultural dimensions and assumptions of reading and writing, but also corresponding relations of power. Of particular interest is early NLS work by Mary Lea and Brian Street (1998), who along with James Paul Gee argue that for literacy practitioners it is a "moral obligation to reflect on [and to] gain meta-knowledge about Discourses and discourses in general" (p. 221) especially when there is reason to believe that we are participatory members of a discourse community that advantages one group over another. Gee (2008) believes that there are two fundamental guiding principles to gaining meta-knowledge that are "absolutely basic" to our understanding of what it means to be ethical in our communication and interactions:

1st - That something would harm someone else (deprive them of what they or the society they are in view as 'goods') is always a good reason (though perhaps not a sufficient reason) not to do it. *2nd* - One always has the moral obligation to change a cultural model into a primary theory when there is good reason to believe that the cultural model advantages oneself or one's group over other people or other groups. (p. 26)

Research on NLS has been updated, extended, and challenged over the last two decades as scholars negotiate issues pertaining to contemporary literacy theory and practice; however, debates between sociolinguists and practice theorists persist. Notable distinctions and opposing views challenge definitions of literacy as "autonomous" or "ideological," whether there is too much or not enough focus on the local, and the oral and literate divide (Street, 2003, Stephens, 2000, Kim, 2003). While these debates are academically positioned, Gee (2000) offers another critical frame of reference: "What is at stake- as Paulo Freire knew so well- is the creation, in and out of schools, of social languages (literacies) through which all of us can read and write more equitable selves and worlds."

Moving from Theory to Praxis

Increasingly, colleges and universities are fostering, financing, and marketing programs and initiatives that place students beyond the boundaries of the classroom and into local, community, and non-profit organizations through service learning and community-based partnerships. My home institution, a private, Catholic college located in the northeastern United States, is no exception. Relevant to this discussion is the College's geographic location in Massachusetts roughly 25 miles north of Boston. The small campus is situated on the grounds of two affluent, predominantly White, suburban communities – North Andover and Andover; the College also borders the urban, immigrant City of Lawrence. Lawrence has been an immigrant city since the turn of the 20th century and continues to be so today with 30.6% of the population being foreign-born and where 28.2% are naturalized citizens (City Data, 2010). Further, the City of Lawrence is the “street” site for the majority of the community projects that the College sponsors. Demographic statistics highlight several marked differences among these neighboring cities. According to recent census data Lawrence's Hispanic or Latino population is 59.71% of its overall population with 34.3% of the overall city population living below the poverty line. Compare these statistics to North Andover's 93.7% White population, of which 2.1% of the overall population live below the poverty line. College student diversity data from 2010 shows the largest percentage of full-time students identified as “White non-Hispanic” (81%); followed by “Race/ethnicity unknown” (12%); “Hispanic” (3%); “Asian/Pacific Islander” (1.7%); “Black non-Hispanic” (1.3%), and “American Indian/Alaskan Natives” (.1%) (Merrimack, 2010).

Currently, all College students enrolled in the newly-developed Honors Program (HP) must take three-sequenced, institutionally-required courses and are mandated to engage with adult service learning community programs. The reason articulated for the adult designation was based on the assumption that transformative learning typically involves feelings of discomfort. Non-Honor's students, on the other hand, may opt to participate at one of over 75 community sites in the City of Lawrence. While there are a significant variety of community sites and corresponding tasks to choose from, students were increasingly being asked to assist with adult ESL learning and literacy instruction at their respective locations. This should come as little surprise given recent trends in immigration and globalization dynamics in the face of federal and state budget shortfalls. Indeed, the students reported “discomfort.” Not unexpectedly, summative feedback from participating HP students and faculty revealed significant frustration.

In recent years, the field of composition has witnessed a public turn in writing; as a result, I was invited to teach as a member of the core HP writing faculty in the program's second year. Immediately, I had to confront my reservations about participation in a top-down, missionary service learning model that effectively sends predominantly white, monolingual students and faculty into immigrant, multi-lingual/cultural street and urban settings with limited, if any preparation. These reservations were understood largely through the examination of my positionality. As a result, I proposed one vital program change that was accepted: delay the service learning requirement to the second semester allowing for a full semester to engage in preparatory learning prior to entering the service learning site. Activities included site visits, interviews, and demographic and historical research that was pedagogically anchored by reflective and dialogue practices. With practices designed to foster the critical examination of ideas and assumptions related to literacy and relations of power, the students and I considered our positionalities with the hope of countering the existing missionary service learning model.

Positionality through the Lens of International Social Work and Indigenous Studies

Discourse within the field of international social work underscores current arguments in adult education that encourage a critical review and deconstruction of social work as a profession. In particular, Askeland and Payne (2006) review international social work incorporating colonial and post colonial terms to dissect international social work and to promote what they refer to as an “anti-colonial” education practice. Askeland and Payne make a link to adult educator, Stephen Brookfield, who notes that an andragogy that is participatory and empowering avoids “the process whereby ideas, structures and actions come to be seen by the majority of people as wholly natural, preordained, and working for their own good, when in fact they are constructed and transmitted by powerful minority interests to protect the status quo that serves those interests” (Brookfield, 1995, p. 15). Hemphill (2001) in *Making Space: Merging Theory and Practice in Adult Education* takes a similar position. Sheared and (2001) note Hemphill’s interpretation of the many theories of adult education that reflect claims of 20th century Western social sciences, although no longer well supported, continue to have hegemonic implications for the field of adult learning. Hemphill delivers a caution for adult educators to scrutinize inclinations that generalize adult learners. Likewise, Merriam (2007) points to the ways “essentializing” indigenous peoples serves to marginalize and dismiss the diversity within indigenous populations. Ultimately, essentializing applied to any population is part of the marginalization process. Indigenous scholars in the field of international social work, cognizant of this dynamic, clearly push for a wider point of view.

The western model of social work is often part of a colonization process with practices that are not readily transferable to other countries and cultures. Indigenous scholars participate in the decidedly “anti-colonial” debates that revolve around not only international social work curriculum but also how and what is taught to indigenous students. They contend that social work as a profession is a western cultural creation and as such there are often built-in blinders to matters of diversity (Gray, Coates, and Yellow Bird, 2008; Weaver, 2008). These blinders are not only in terms of curriculum but also in terms of those who teach within this profession. Understanding the concept of positionality allows for the discussion to move away from a myopic binary towards openness to a myriad of diversity issues.

Moving from Theory to Praxis

At about one-fifth the size of the United States, Alaska is the largest state in the union. The town of Bethel is situated in the Western region of Alaska, an area about the size of Ohio. Scattered throughout this primarily flat tundra-covered landscape are 55 Yup’ik, Inupiaq, and Cup’ik Eskimo villages. Bethel, the hub of the region, is the location of the Kuskokwim campus, which is housed within the College of Rural and Community Development (CRCDD) of the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF). The Kuskokwim campus offers a 34 credit college certificate in Rural Human Services (RHS).

The Rural Human Service (RHS) program is a closed cohort model of education delivery, and the students who join the cohort are primarily adult Indigenous Alaskans drawing from small rural villages throughout the region. While attending classes, students work in the human services employed as battered women shelter workers, Indian Child Welfare Workers (ICWA), Behavioral Health aides (BHA) and other non-profit providers of social services. Most have not been in an educational setting for between 10 and 30 years. As their journals often describe, few

enter the classroom without reservation, fear and low confidence; however, almost all (90 – 95%) will graduate with a 34 credit college certificate in rural human services (RHS) upon successful completion of week-long intensives over two academic school years. Attending the intensives requires students to travel by flight from their villages within and across the western region. Each intensive is worth two college credits with follow up homework. During the week and evening labs, two Elders participate as part of the teaching team. Throughout the RHS program, students are supported to create a learning community in which their cultural values are part of the epistemology and design of the week. Elders play a pivotal and cultural role as teachers in the classroom through use of stories and support to students.

As the only non-indigenous person in a classroom of 25, the relevance of positionality as both a concept and as a reflective guide informs my work as coordinator and lead instructor within this community of learners. Hilary Weaver (2005), an indigenous woman, social work professor and scholar highlights a helpful structure with which to illuminate one's "outsider" status while also moving towards culturally attuned approaches with indigenous peoples. She posits that when considering work with indigenous populations, an "outsider" needs to become aware of issues around "diversity, history, culture and contemporary realities (p. 85)" of those indigenous populations. For example, when considering historical context the concept of positionality aids in the evaluation of my own historical context as a western white woman and also the historical context of my indigenous students. Specific to education, my own historical context was one in which, generally speaking, the values of my home and community were mirrored throughout the school day. For my adult indigenous students nothing could be further from the truth. This understanding challenges me to help create a community learning environment in which the totality of my students' "selves" can be present within the classroom. Historically, indigenous students had been told to leave their cultural, spiritual, and community "selves" at the door in order to enter the western classroom and be "successful." However, in the Rural Human Service (RHS) classroom, they will most likely not be successful *unless* they bring their full selves into the learning environment. Most if not all of the students find this a refreshing and deeply profound experience. Grounding some of my teaching experiences through the concept of positionality facilitates my understanding of my own reactions to a classroom which does not privilege more western pedagogical practices. It helps undergird an ongoing and necessary reflective process I have come to consider an ethical duty.

Conclusion

The implications of marshaling an interdisciplinary perspective on issues of diversity, cultural attunement, and the concept of one's positionality can be profound. Engaging scholarship across disciplinary borders widens the space for educators and diverse learners alike. When we embrace personal reflection on how our positionality influences our pedagogical practices, we are working to avoid a kind of faulty generalization, both in terms of ourselves as practitioner but also of the student. Ultimately, linking scholarship across disciplines aptly mirrors the border crossing found in our institutional contexts and provides nearly limitless possibilities for widening the geography of discourse in adult education.

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