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Metaphors of Literacy: Dialogues in Inclusive Settings

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Abstract

This article discusses the importance of metaphors in education and in inclusive settings in particular. Metaphors are seen as the fabric of collaboration through dialogue across the curriculum. The article analyzes the dialogues among the Language Arts, Social Studies, and inclusion teacher in a large middle school in the Southwest of the United States in an effort to coordinate literacy planning and instruction in these content areas. From the analysis of the dialogues in the author's journal, metaphors emerge as a central component to make meaning in literacy instruction. Three main metaphors of literacy were recursive in the dialogues: (a) literacy as a multiple path for learning (b) literacy as a bridge for academic success and (c) literacy as a window to read the social and personal world of students in inclusive settings. The author of the article advocates for a qualitative research approach where metaphors are the core of methodology in the analysis of language data in teachers' discourses to refine our understanding on how language plays a crucial role in the planning and implementation of literacy instruction in K-12 schools.

Keywords: metaphor, literacy, inclusion, collaboration, dialogism

1. Introduction

Literacy in the content areas has become a critical component to plan and implement instruction across the curriculum in middle and high schools in the United States. The National Institute for Literacy (2007), reports that the demand to prepare pre-service and in-service literacy teachers in K-12 represents the priority for educators and policy makers. The National Institute for Literacy claims that literacy in the content areas help students become lifelong readers by engaging with different genres and by developing critical thinking and metacognition in different academic disciplines.

Baratz-Snowden and Hammond (2005) contends that effective content area teachers must balance content and process when planning for instruction to support students' ability to engage with texts that present different academic challenges in terms of lexicon and conceptual difficulty. The Commission on Adolescent Literacy (1999) points out that literacy learning in adolescents is paramount in preparing them for a complex literacy society in the 21st century. The Commission (1999) writes,

They will need literacy to feed their imaginations so they can create the world of the future. In a complex and sometimes even dangerous world, their ability to read will be crucial. Continual instruction beyond the early grades is needed (p. 3).

Therefore, adolescent literacy must support adolescents in reading the world around them and help them transforming the way they read, write and understand a complex global world. Literacy in the content areas is paramount to respond to the challenges of a complex literate society. Teaching for content by ignoring the process is not possible anymore and effective content areas teachers are able to design instruction by balanced approach between content and process (A. V. Manzo, Manzo, & Estes, 2001).

This article analyzed the experiences of the author as a social studies special education teacher in a large middle school in the Southwest of the United States applying the principles of content and process in supporting students' learning in social studies in inclusive settings when participating in Professional Learning Communities to design and implement literacy strategies across the curriculum. Metaphor analysis will be used to conceptualize and clarify the conversations occurred in the Professional Learning Communities to

demonstrate how complex concepts and planning across the curriculum were captured in the use of metaphor used during our meetings.

The dialogues took place among three teachers in Language Arts, Social Studies and the author as a special education inclusion teacher supporting the Social Studies teacher in inclusive settings during the academic year 2008-09 in a large middle school in the Southwest of the United States. The journal I kept during the Professional Learning Communities meetings represents the writing, thinking, and reflective space where metaphors of literacy sediment and became a powerful utterance to semiotically conceptualize literacy in the content areas (Moon, 1996; Volosinov, 1973).

2. Metaphors as Utterance to Understand Educational Contexts

As educators, we are naturally inclined to pay attention to discourses in educational settings. We carefully listen to what other educators say to support and further enhance reflective thinking in planning curriculum and instruction. Discourse in education is defined here as what is said and done using language in real occurrences interpreted and actualized by educators in specific contexts and circumstances (Semino, 2008). Also, the approach to discourse in the context of this paper emerges from a Bakhtinian scholarship of dialogicality and textual formation within a social semiotic tradition (Bakhtin, 1986; Hodge & Kress, 1988). The textual discourses emerged in the paper stem from the concept that signs in language represent more than isolated words (Hodge & Kress, 1988). The textual formation of metaphors emerged naturally from a social semiotic context of use of language in natural settings.

More attention to nuances of language became the focus when we as teacher educators began to collaborate in a large middle school in the Southwest of the United States. We started paying attention to the non-literal language, metaphors in the specific, due to the fact that we became more and more aware of their importance in unpacking and explaining complex concepts in educational settings and practices (Jensen, 2006; Munby, 1987). The use of metaphors was the core of our dialogues on curriculum and instruction during our meetings to support students with special needs in inclusive settings.

Semino (2008) defines metaphor as "a phenomenon whereby we talk and, potentially, think about something in terms of something else" (p. 1). This definition emphasize a transfer of meaning or a substitution that occurs in language at a non-literal level, which allows the speaker to explain complex concepts in terms of more familiar concepts in the language the speaker uses. The speaker uses a generative quality of language to gain new perspectives of the world on a particular experience (Shon, 1983). This helps the individual to gain new insights into how people perceive the context in which their experiences take place and gain particular meanings (Morgan, 1997).

Educators use language to clarify complex educational concepts in their everyday lives in the classroom. They often use metaphors as a lens through which they can delve into the complex relationships between curriculum and instruction in educational settings (Cameron, 1999). Metaphors as a natural language event allows educators to make abstract educational concepts concrete (Freeman, 1996). Concepts as literacy in the content areas or differentiated instruction can be metaphorized by educators to apply them across the curriculum in a way that is effective and supportive of students' learning.

According to Lakoff and Johnson (2003) metaphor helps our conceptual system to better understand our experiences in different social and cultural contexts. Metaphor can help educators to self-reflect at a deeper level and refine their pedagogical maps to guide their teaching and learning by refining their system of thinking and meaning in educational practices.

The emergence of metaphor as utterance in the educational dialogues in the present study, also brought to the fore the core element of the semiotic nature of the participants and their interpretation and application of curriculum and instruction in inclusive settings. Volosinov (1973) claims that dialogue is the basic model of reciprocal relations" (p. 4). According to Volosinov (1973) dialogue assumes "the character of a primordial source of social creativity in general" (p. 4). In turn, metaphor as primary unit of language in dialogic settings represents the attempt to become aware and understand our experiences as semiotic beings, to understand the system of ideas embedded in the language of education we use, our axiological system that positions ourselves in the curriculum and the instructional processes we plan and apply in K-12 settings (Cameron, 2003; Jensen, 2006).

3. Methodology

3.1 Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities are a team of teachers and educators that work together to support literacy across the curriculum. Research suggests that the use of Professional Learning Communities improved classroom teaching and learning across the content areas. Elmore (2002) points out that Professional Learning Communities increase classroom learning due to a focus on high learning standards and on evidence of students' learning. Moreover, as Elmore (2002) maintains Professional Learning Communities allow teacher to shift their focus on learning embedded in teaching for quality and content.

Knapp et al. (2003) suggests that Professional Learning Communities display four critical characteristics paramount for supporting learning via effective teaching: (a) ongoing and formative assessment of students' learning needs; (b) planning on teaching and learning contextual to the school needs; (c) aligned with reform initiatives and (d) grounded in a collaborative, inquiry-based approach to learning. In turn, Professional Learning Communities are directly connected with the needs and interests of participants themselves, enabling learners to expand on content knowledge and practice that is directly connected with the work of their students in the classroom (Corcoran 1995; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Du Four, 2004; Little, 1988).

The dialogues among the author of this article and the Language Arts and Social Studies teachers took place in a large middle school in the Southwest of the United States. The school had a large special education program ranging from community based instruction to full inclusion. At the beginning of the academic year 2008-09, the district mandate was to develop and implement professional learning communities to have a better synergy and collaboration among content areas teachers at the middle and high school levels. The goal was to implement content literacy strategies for all students and for students with or without disabilities.

The collaboration took place with two eighth grade teachers in Language Arts and Social Studies. We developed our professional learning community agenda by taking into account the students with and without disabilities in our inclusive classrooms. The IEPs (Individualized Education Programs) were carefully analyzed during our meetings to assess the literacy levels of the students with disabilities in order to design achievable goals during the academic year. The students with disabilities were five shared among the Language Arts and Social Studies teacher. The disability according to their IEP was LD (Learning Disabled).

The professional learning communities meetings were scheduled once a week for two hours after school. The goal was to plan and implement instruction in Language Arts and Social Studies by designing literacy instruction to support students' reading and writing comprehension (Fisher & Frey, 2008). The meetings were designed as dialogues in focus groups where each teacher had the opportunity to present, discuss, share and critically analyze the data collected during classroom instruction in Language Arts and Social Studies (Markova, 2007). The dialogues in focus groups gave us the opportunity to see knowledge as a shared practice and literacy as a social and cultural practice to broaden our perspective on what literacy means in the lives of our students (Bartlett & Holland, 2002).

3.2 The Reflective Journal

The use of reflective journals was crucial to jot down the salient points of the Professional Learning Community Collaboration with the Language Arts and Social Studies teachers during our meetings. The format of the learning journals took the shape of a cognitive map where I recorded insights, images, questions, fragments of conversations, and snippets of language to capture the content of curriculum planning and instruction (Moon, 2006). A choice was consciously made to keep the journal as an open space for novel ideas about literacy to critically reflect on curriculum planning and instruction in the content areas.

The reflective journal was a space for reflecting thinking and collaborative space (Alterio, 2004). I envisioned the reflective journal as a net to capture the crucial points of our inclusive collaborations, the changes in our perceptions on curriculum and instruction, and conceptual changes in planning with literacy strategies in the content areas (Alterio, 2004). The reflective journal was an extension of my thinking as an inclusive educator (Walker, 1985). The reflective journal naturally brought to the fore the use of metaphor in planning literacy instruction in inclusive settings as a part of an ongoing conversation on how to use literacy in Language Arts and Social Studies in inclusive settings. A pattern unfolded in the reflective journal where the use of metaphors to conceptualize literacy in inclusive settings became the main language pattern to understand literacy curriculum and instruction in inclusive settings. The questions that were slowly taking form and importance was how to analyze the metaphors in the reflective journal to capture the dynamics of the dialogues during our professional

learning communities meetings and to center the unit of analysis for planning literacy instruction in inclusive settings (Greves, 2005).

3.3 Cognitive Metaphor Theory

In their work Metaphors We Live By (2003), Lakoff and Johnson demonstrate that the use of metaphors in everyday discourses is not just a way to talk about one thing in terms of another thing but also a way of thinking on our experience in social and cultural contexts. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) claim that conceptual metaphor represents a cognitive map that orient the speaker towards a more in depth understanding of a particular experience embedded in the ideology and language of the community. The conceptual domain of metaphors bring to the fore the way a community thinks, plans, and acts on experiences deemed important for its members.

Another important ramification of metaphor as a cognitive social and cultural map to delve into the experiences of speakers on a community of practice is that a metaphor is utterance that semiotically captures the core of meaning in discourses (Cameron, 1999). According to the theory of metaphor as utterance (Volosinov, 1973; Bakhtin, 1986), the speaker makes use of metaphor to develop dialogical relations that semiotically produce meaning through signs. In turn, metaphor as utterance is central to how our cognitive system makes sense of our social and cultural experiences within a systematic semiotic process (Cameron, 1999).

The application of CMT to the reflective journal brought to the fore the emergence and importance of the educational discourses during our Professional Learning Community meetings. The construction of categories of metaphor on literacy spawns from the language captured in the reflective journal. The classification of metaphors on literacy in my reflective journal followed the model of the Topic-Vehicle framework in CMT. In doing so, specific categories of metaphors on literacy were used in planning instruction in inclusive settings. Also, the application of CMT to the analysis of the reflective journal allowed to analyze the metaphors of literacy within the contexts of teachers' pedagogical understanding of the curriculum, their professional and personal background, the way their personal and professional knowledge was merging to conceptualize literacy in inclusive settings (Roshkow, 1988).

4. Findings

Three categories of literacy metaphors were identified in the reflective journal: (a) literacy as a multiple path for learning; (b) literacy as a bridge for academic success and (c) literacy as a window to read the social and personal world of students in inclusive settings. These metaphors were recurring themes in my reflective journal and were constantly adopted by the teacher during our Professional Learning Community meetings in planning instruction in Language Arts and Social Studies.

4.1 Literacy as a Multiple Path for Learning

During our first meeting at the beginning of the fall semester 2008, the Language Arts teacher was planning a unit on changes in the United States of America. The plan was to incorporate this unit plan across content areas where the social studies teacher had to use the concepts of change from the early 1600s to the modern times. During our meeting we brainstormed some ideas on how to develop a sequence of instruction that could take into account two important aspects of changes in U.S. History: (a) changes in ethnic and racial composition; (b) changes in culture and language due to immigration in U.S. history. We also planned how to deliver the content by using literacy strategies that could help students in inclusive settings have equal access to education (IDEA, 2004).

The first literacy metaphor that came up from this first meeting was literacy as multiple paths to learning. The metaphor of the path was used by the Language Arts teacher when we were brainstorming three literacy strategies to activate prior knowledge (KWL chart, Frayer model for vocabulary building and Venn diagram for comparing and contrasting activity in reading comprehension). The reflective journal reports "…multiple paths…this looks like a good way to bridge the two contents areas. I need more thought on this!!. Get back to the adolescent literature on literacy…sees how to embed the strategies discussed in our meeting in Language Arts and social studies."

The planning and coordination of literacy across the content areas is critical to planning and instruction when supporting students with special needs in inclusive settings (McIntosh & Draper, 1997). The way we planned the use of literacy strategies in content areas from the metaphor literacy as multiple paths to learning allowed us to develop a strategy guide for the students to use concurrently in Language Arts and social studies so as they could understand what to do and how to read for meaning across the curriculum (Kist, 2001).

The first meeting was crucial to support the critical analysis of language used in our Professional Learning Community (Elmore, 2002) and become aware of the importance of metaphors to guide our literacy planning

and instruction across the content areas. Metaphors represented an important language and conceptual tool to read our thoughts as professional educators and individuals with different experiences and knowledge in supporting the literacy needs of students with special needs in inclusive settings.

4.2 Literacy as a Bridge for Academic Success

Our second meeting was planned after one month of instruction on the Unit on Changes in U.S. history to analyze and discuss the data relative to the literacy assessment of what student learned in the first part of the Unit. We wanted to see if the literacy strategies applied were effective or if we had to change or modify the delivery of the content in Language Arts and social studies. The plan was to look at the data collected and compare and contrast the literacy strategies.

The language Arts teacher said: "I would like to say that the literacy strategies were effective in studying the wave of immigration in the U.S. In particular, you know…the Venn diagram was a very effective literacy strategy when we compared the immigration of Europeans to the U.S. in Emma Lazarus' poem and the first immigrants, the Pilgrims, who came over here in the sixteen hundreds." She also added: "I believe that our planning literacy in the content areas across the curriculum is a bridge to success!" The social studies teacher followed up saying that the Venn diagram was very helpful to us to analyze concepts such as exploitation, slavery, hope, and American Dream. She pointed out "It is true that planning literacy across the curriculum is a bridge to success. The Venn diagram was very helpful because we can visualize and discuss difficult concepts and then using it to develop divergent questions during our discussion on U.S. immigration."

We pointed out that students with special needs were making progress in reading comprehension and ability to organize knowledge because they were able to connect the literacy strategies across the two content areas and see the logic of applying them with different content knowledge (Allen, 2008). Also, we agreed that one crucial point of our collaboration was the opportunity to maximize our preparation time and invest our resources in a more effective way to plan teaching in inclusive settings. In other words, the collaboration in planning literacy in the content areas in inclusive settings was creating a bridge to success for students in our classrooms where literacy was the hub to connect content and process in the flow of instruction (Blackburn & Clark, 2007).

4.3 Literacy as a Window to Read the Social and Personal World of Students in Inclusive Settings

The last entry in the reflective journal was helpful to plan ahead for the next meeting. The core of the analysis was to delve into the thoughts reordered in the journal and understand the implications for literacy instruction in the content areas. A more in depth analysis of the literature on adolescent literacy was paramount to sift through the studies in content area literacy to see how to refine and clarify the notes jotted down in the reflective journal during our Professional Learning Communities meetings.

I came across an interesting study on literacy as cultural practices in sociocultural contexts written by Bartlett and Holland (2002). The reading of the article was important to see literacy as a powerful conceptual and practical tool to support students in their cultural and social spaces by validating who they are and what they can share in the classroom. Bartlett and Holland (2002) point out that literacy is a cultural, social, historical, political and ideological event that permeates the whole human activity. This position on literacy from Bartlett and Holland (2002) opened up more avenues for refining the collaboration with the Language Arts and Social Studies teachers by looking at literacy practices as strategies more integrated and attuned with the literate lives of adolescents in our school. A note in my journal reported "Need to bring this article to the next meeting … worth to discuss". The meeting began by discussing the next steps in literacy instruction with an analysis of the Bartlett and Holland's (2002) article on the desk of the conference room. The literacy strategy proposed was the use of an autobiographical reflective activity where students in Language Arts and Social Studies had to use to write on their own experiences on what it means to move from one place to another and the changes that occurred. The goal to use the autobiographical reflective activity was to activate students' funds of knowledge to support the literacy development of our learners in reading and writing in the content areas.

What we noticed at the next meeting was that the autobiographies presented the search for a sense of place and belonging. The written word helped students to find an identity and a voice in the curriculum (Holland & Lave, 2001). Literacy in the form of autobiographical narrative gave the opportunity to our students to use language to position themselves in the curriculum and to find an identity in relation to the content of the unit on change. As Nieto (2009) points out student are motivated to engage with the curriculum when teachers use activities that value their identity and their voice in the curriculum. Also, students are motivated to engage with literacy in the content areas when they see literacy as a sociocultural practice leading to a connection and a more in depth understanding of the experiences embedded in the knowledge of the content area (Pearson, 2009).

The metaphor of literacy as a window to read the social and personal worlds of students emerged from our discussion of the autobiographies' content during our meetings. The reflective journal highlighted the following point "good teaching is always found at the crossroads of good planning and students' participation… I believe that it was our enthusiasm for what we are doing that gave our students the opportunity to become an integral part of our literacy instruction." Later, an addendum expanded on the previous concept "motivation is always a mutual process, osmosis between two parties … you do not teach alone … students will always be part of your success or frustrations".

5. Discussion

The dialogues reported in this article bring to the fore the importance of language as dialogical process in planning instruction across the content areas. The dialogues are embedded in a non-literal language, metaphors, that captured the deep layers of meaning in language used as collaborative tool in inclusive settings (Badley & Van Brummelen, 2012). Metaphors were that part of language that helped us think about curriculum and instruction across the content areas in inclusive settings in a more systematic and analytical way. The use of metaphors emerged as a need to continuously clarifying complex concepts about literacy in inclusive settings. A way of working the hyphens of our thoughts about what literacy means for our students and students with special needs.

Lakoff and Johnson (2003) write the concepts that govern our thoughts are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning; down to the most mundane details… Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor (p. 3).

As educators, we are always confronted with complex concepts that need to be made concrete or clarified at a non-literal level. From the language recorded in my reflective journal metaphors emerged as a natural component of our planning and teaching literacy across the curriculum. Language and metaphors in particular were our space of negotiation and clarification of planning literacy instruction across the curriculum.

Metaphors are part of a complex process of meaning formation using language in natural settings. Metaphors represent an important framework to study educational discourses by delving into the complexities of teachers' thoughts on education and learning (Jensen, 2006). The dialogues of teachers' discourses in this study demonstrate what language entails beyond the literal level. The field of education needs to focus on metaphors to unpack the complex meanings found in teachers' language when used in a dialogical mode (Greves, 2005; Stevens, 2006). It is the system of language as semiotic mode of meaning and communication that we need to analyze to understand how teachers design, plan and implement literacy instruction across the curriculum (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress, 2010). It is attending the language we use as educators that will give us more opportunities to better support our students' literacy needs across the curriculum by being more aware of our limitations and to overcome them in our everyday teaching.

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