Essay

Transnational Identity and Migrant Language Learners: The Promise of Digital Storytelling

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Abstract

As technology enables migrant learners to maintain multi-stranded connections with their countries of origin and settlement, they engage with the world with transnational identities that negotiate a complex network of values, ideologies, and cultures. How teachers and peers recognize that migrants come with specific histories, knowledges and competencies shapes migrant learners' investment in learning. By building on their transnational literacies, the language learning classroom can be a Third Space which acknowledges and affirms their fluid, multidimensional identities. Digital storytelling, by allowing them to share their personal histories, their stories of migration and assimilation, and the material conditions of their lived experiences, holds great potential for enabling migrant learners to be fully invested in their transnational identities and to claim their right to speak.

From the moment migrant families or individuals cross borders through varying immigration categories—as investors, professionals, refugees or temporary workers—the trajectories of their assimilation will vary. Driven by diverse goals, serving different needs of nation-states, and equipped with varying levels of economic, cultural and social capital, immigrants, sojourners, and migrant workers occupy different social locations in their adopted or host country. With the rapid advancement of technology, the structures of migrant socialization have changed, as have patterns of migrant movement and employment. Through more affordable travel costs, mobile communication devices, social media, and online connectivity, migrant learners are increasingly able to navigate more seamlessly between their countries of origin and of settlement, and pursue their lives with a greater sense of *transnationalism* (Basch, Schiller & Blanc, 1994). Because these boundaries have been eroded, the arenas in which

migrant learners participate and exchange economic, social, and cultural capital have become much wider and more complex. They can no longer be understood just as migrants on a local or national scale. Traversing deterritorialized spaces, where culture transcends geographical demarcations (Appadurai, 1990), they operate as *transnationals* who are able to maintain ties with their home country, while building new relations within their host or adopted country. For migrants who are language learners, such transnationalism offers new sets of opportunities for language teachers.

To help expand possibilities for migrant language learners, education needs to be able to recognize and harness the transnational identities of migrants; identities that have been constructed by particular material conditions and histories. By going beyond the frames of a romanticized multiculturalism or a deterministic view of migration, teachers can develop literacies and classroom practices that take into account: 1) the modes and degrees of affiliation of migrant language learners with their country of origin; 2) the material conditions of these learners in their country of settlement, and 3) the extent to which the interplay of these two shape their ways of thinking and learning, their degrees of assimilation, and their investment in learning. This paper focuses on these considerations and discusses what these mean not only for the way we teach, but also the way we affirm the identities of our learners. It examines digital storytelling as one way to develop their transnational literacies and to equip them with a greater sense of agency. We begin with a consideration of theories of identity and investment, with particular reference to migrant language learners.

Identity, Investment, and the Right to Speak

As a social practice, language learning is implicated in relations of power (Norton, 2013). Indexical of larger, institutional structures, the classroom, together with other learning contexts, involves the trading of symbolic and material resources. The heterogeneity of language learners and their differential access to resources reflect the inequitably structured world where inscriptions of identity such as class, race, gender, ethnicity, and ability can shape levels of participation in classrooms and communities. Because they position themselves and are positioned in particular ways within these contexts, language learners negotiate their identities and invest in learning in diverse and

complex ways. *Identity,* being a person's sense of self and relation to the world, is understood as dynamic, multiple, diverse and even contradictory. It is a continual site of struggle, as language learners navigate through different contexts of power, where some subject positions may be in conflict with others. When migrant language learners speak, they do not just exchange information, they also reorganize a sense of who they are and how they relate to the world. Frequently, they seek to construct identities that would allow them to gain legitimacy in the spaces they occupy. How successfully they are able to negotiate these varying conditions of power impacts the extent to which they will claim or forfeit their right to speak in specific contexts (Norton, 2013).

Just as identity constantly changes across time and space, the notion of *investment* similarly captures the fluidity and dynamism of the social world. In contrast to the psychological construct of motivation, which often assumes a unitary, fixed, and ahistorical learner, the sociological construct of investment recognizes that learners operate in different social contexts (Norton, 2013). They invest in learning because they know that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, and these social and economic gains in turn enhance the range of identities they can claim in a particular community. In the workplace, for instance, the migrant who struggles with the target language may either be refused entry into the network of power or feel inadequate in the presence of the target language speaker who possesses the capital of fluency and local knowledge. How invested she is in her identity as a multicultural citizen and how she is able to challenge the subject position of illegitimate speaker of English will determine her capacity to claim the right to speak (Norton, 2013).

The Multi-stranded Connections of Transnational Identity and the *Third Space*

Given the diverse backgrounds of migrant language learners, the beliefs and uses of language and literacy that exist in the multicultural classroom are thus an amalgamation of values that come from different nation states, regional cultures and local ideologies. Whether they view the target language as a necessity or as a key to cosmopolitan membership, these language ideologies inform their attitudes to, investment in, and strategies for learning (Shin, 2012; Song, 2010). The transnational affiliations of these learners may vary depending on the distance between host and home countries, the economic relations between them, cross-border policies, the legal status and context of

migrants, and the politics and media capabilities of both countries of origin and settlement (Lam and Warriner, 2012). As migrant learners negotiate their transnational identities, they apply different sets of rules of practices and activate various dispositions. Because economic, social and cultural capital can be valued, devalued, exchanged and accumulated as they move across these transnational spaces (Kelly and Lusis, 2006), how migrant learners invest in their identities and their learning can thus be understood with reference to the possible gain and loss across these different contexts.

As transnationalism opens up multiple spaces, Kelly (2012) points out also that the gendered and racialized identities of migrants are still often based upon their country of origin, and being from a specific country begins to imply a certain aptitude or suitability for specific occupations. Countries of origin, themselves implicated in a global class hierarchy, can position migrants in ways that refract this world economic order. In a study of immigrant learners, for instance, Gunderson (2007) noted how Mandarin and Cantonese speakers were considered to be from affluent families while Vietnamese speakers were understood to be refugees with limited economic capital. The racialization and marginalization of specific ethnic groups can thus be read as corollary to subordination within neocolonialism and global capitalism. The very act of migration itself sometimes becomes understood as the natural result of the underdevelopment of specific countries. This positioning, Furstenau (2005) argues, shapes the opportunities migrant learners can imagine for themselves. In Germany, while immigrant Portuguese students generally have high educational participation, those who are perceived as part of the underprivileged global workforce struggle for legitimacy, and this results in poorer educational outcomes. Guided by national norms, public schools do not provide for transnational transfer of knowledge, leaving students to rely on their social capital and shared knowledge of the immigrant community. On the other hand, the cosmopolitan elite who would have access to transnational education systems, like international schools or higher education franchises, are able to access better educational and employment opportunities because the system certifies their multilingual and intercultural competencies.

As people move across borders, the linguistic resources they bring with them are subject to different *orders of indexicality*, that is, their styles and registers, are measured

against a value system that reflects the biases and assumptions of the larger sociocultural context (Blommaert, 2007). Functions that are valid in local settings are imposed on the ways of speaking of transnationals, and discourses only gain value when others grant them, based on their market value. The English of urban Africans within local African contexts may carry prestige and afford middle-class identities, but when spoken in London it becomes a stigmatizing resource that position them as lower class (Blommaert, 2005). To understand how migrant language learners enact and develop their competencies, we need to examine the process through a lens where ideology and identity intersect, and where learners are recognized as social actors who have the capacity to navigate through multiple, sometimes competing, ideologies. As they operate in these transnational, transideological spaces, they are positioned in multiple ways, and the linguistic practices they bring with them are assigned different values. By understanding their sociopolitical contexts and the structural forces they contend with, we can better understand how they appropriate language to claim power (De Costa, 2010).

Recognizing the hybridity of languages and cultures that transnationals possess, Bhabha (1994) speaks of a *Third Space* in which one no longer needs to rely on the binaries of home or host countries. In this space, the communicative practices of transnationals interact using different languages and communicative codes, and become *transidiomatic practices* that are available in a range of communicative channels, both local and distant (Jacquemet, 2005). Teacher and student scripts intersect, and what is regarded as knowledge is expanded, allowing more possibilities for generative interaction. The *Third Space* transforms the social organization of learning (Gutierrez, 2008). Activating the transnational identities and literacies of migrant youth and allowing them to reflect on and share their lived experiences as migrants helps reformulate acceptable knowledge in the classroom. (Lam & Warriner, 2012) This is the very reason Norton (2013) argues that beyond learning the rules of use of a target language, we must seek to understand how these rules are socially and historically constructed. By exposing the devices of power that legitimize these rules, learners are able to question the implicit assumptions of these interactions. They have the agency to reject whatever subject position is assigned to them and reframe relations to claim power. Developing the

learner's communicative competence must thus include an awareness of how to challenge and transform social practices of marginalization.

Transnational literacies and digital storytelling

By recognizing migrant learners as rich resources of linguistic and cultural capital, language teachers can construct a classroom environment where bilingualism and multicultural, multimodal communicative practices are valued, and where students gain a sense of belonging, legitimacy and membership. In this *Third Space*, transnational identities are accommodated and affirmed by tapping into their native cultures, knowledges and languages (Duff, 20078; Kim & Duff, 2012). By building on prior knowledge that is then connected to literacy standards considered important in school, *transnational literacies* allow migrant learners to gain a better understanding of their linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds (Jimenez, Smith & Teague, 2009). *Identity texts* , creative works that reflect these learners' multiliterate and multilingual identities (Cummins & Early, 2010), could also allow them to appreciate one another's linguistic identities and metalinguistic skills.

As migrant learners possess insights about being part of a community that goes beyond nation-state boundaries, transnational literacies can thus allow them to understand local, national and global issues, and engage with empathy and sensitivity with people of diverse, often underprivileged backgrounds. When teachers are able to retrieve the transnational experiences and knowledge from students, the classroom becomes a generative space for democratic and intercultural citizens who are able to empathize with the plights of different people (Sanchez, 2007). Empathy and desire for social change begin with an understanding of others; to listen to their stories and to share one's own. Indeed, Anderson (1983), in speaking of the nation as an imagined community where lives are bound by "a deep horizontal comradeship" (p.7) recognizes how it is constructed through narratives, so that "in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (p.6). People are able to identify as members of specific communities through stories, and it is through storytelling that one can reflect, negotiate and constitute identities**.** While individual life stories can reflect the systems of belief of certain social groups, it is also through stories that one can position one's self in new ways and construct a new sense of self (de Fina, 2003).

For migrant learners who traverse transnational spaces and ways of thinking, one particularly powerful medium for affirming identities is digital storytelling. *Digital stories* are brief personal narratives told through images, sounds and words, and which use new media technology. They incorporate students' lifeworlds in the learning process, and provide them with opportunities for creation and collaboration. Adults and youth can identify and reflect on pivotal moments that shape their life trajectories and recontextualize them through multiple media and modes. Multimodal stories that use the mother tongue of learners can be taken home for translations, bridging home and school to allow learners to have a broader understanding of literacy. Immigrant parents who may be marginalized by the school system are invited to participate in their children's learning experiences, to help construct the stories, and to be seen as experts (Lotherington, 2011). The storytellers, by borrowing and repurposing texts, images and music, are able to claim authorial agency (Hull and Katz, 2006) and be co-authors and agents of literacy acquisition (Lotherington, 2011). Because of connectivity and the transportability of the digital, their stories can be shared not only with local communities but with transnational audiences, allowing a greater awareness of various cultural, social and historical contexts (Cope & Kalantzis, 2010).

It is precisely because of the powerful potential of digital storytelling in empowering the identities of migrant learners that we have recently initiated a project at a secondary school in Vancouver with a predominantly migrant population. *Literacy through Digital Storytelling* is a 3-month program that prepares learners to create their own personal digital stories, while providing opportunities to tap into their transnational literacies. Designed to culminate with a public screening event with the local community, the program is divided into four phases: i) *story construction* involves learning the genre conventions of the narrative by reading other stories of migrant experiences, and learning the use of evocative language; 2) *multimodal selection* allows learners to understand how images and sounds can communicate specific meanings and convey emotions; 3) *storyboard design* enables learners to integrate these different elements into a concise and cohesive narrative; and iv) *editing* equips them with the necessary digital skills to produce the video. To affirm their bilingual identities, learners have the choice to use their own mother tongue for audio narration, while providing subtitles in English. While

teachers will guide the learning process and provide necessary information, the workshop format will allow peers to provide feedback and help each other at different phases of the production. While some learners can be particularly skillful in crafting a story through words, others may be good at choosing images, finding the right music, matching the different elements, and using the digital tools. By encouraging them to share their emerging areas of competence, we support learners in producing their stories as a collaborative effort.

Royer and Richards (2008) point out that digital storytelling does not just develop writing skills and digital literacy, it also improves reading comprehension. They demonstrate how the digital storytelling process of topic selection, content research, script writing, image selection, and recording of narration can be aligned with the reading strategies recommended by the National Reading Panel of the US (National Reading Panel Report, 2000). These strategies include active listening, cooperative learning, fluency, graphic organizers, mental imagery, question asking, reciprocal teaching, sequencing, summarizing, and vocabulary. They also link it to Allington's (2005) five pillars of effective reading instruction: *writing* and revising drafts; *access, choice and collaboration* by choosing their own topics and partnering with others; *differentiated reading instruction* by using their own language and experiences in constructing texts; *classroom organization* by working with peers and the teacher; and *expert tutoring* through peer support and mentoring.

There are a number of resources online that discuss the elements of digital storytelling and its learning applications. The University of Houston's *Educational Uses of Digital Storytelling* (http://digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu) is a comprehensive website that provides a summary of digital storytelling elements, examples, software, lesson plans and tips. Founded by Lambert, one of the pioneers of digital storytelling, *Center for Digital Storytelling* (http://storycenter.org) provides examples of migrant stories and features the Digital Storytelling Cookbook, which discusses story elements and approaches to scripting and digitizing story elements. An initiative of University of California, Berkeley to address the digital divide called *Digital Underground Storytelling for Youth* (http://www.oaklanddusty.org), or DUSTY, is an after-school program where volunteers from the community help students of diverse backgrounds to create

multimedia presentations (Hull and Katz, 2006). *Scribjab* (http://www.scribjab.com), on the other hand, is a website and iPad application for young learners to read and create digital stories using multiple languages, and was developed by Canadian scholars Kelleen Toohey and Diane Dagenais at Simon Fraser University. The African Storybook Project (http://www.saide.org.za/african-storybook-project) is another innovative project with much potential for the future. Developed by the South African Institute for Distance Education, it is providing open-access digital stories, in both African languages and English, for young learners in sub-Saharan Africa. Bonny Norton is working with a team of scholars to help develop a research network for this large-scale project (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rc-qjmdetp8&feature=youtu.be).

Conclusion

As technology allows migrant learners to navigate more fluidly between countries of origin and settlement, they develop transnational identities that evolve from a rich, dynamic convergence of differing ideologies, communicative practices and multi-stranded relations. To affirm these complex identities, classroom practices need to draw from and legitimize prior knowledges, competencies, and experiences. By creating this *Third Space* that allows the hybridity of languages and cultures to thrive, teachers can bridge their transnational literacies to the literacies of school and reformulate conceptions of what is acceptable knowledge in the classroom. Digital storytelling is one particular method through which these transnational literacies come to life. Through the act of telling one's story through different multimodal elements and languages, migrant learners are given an opportunity to become agents of their learning and authors of their own representation. By harnessing their complex identities through critical classroom practices, language teachers are able to carve out a space where they can be fully invested in their learning, where they can find their voice and claim the right to speak. It is through this transnational voice that migrant learners can share their distinct histories and unfolding stories, and pursue their imagined futures.

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