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The Limits of Institutionalized Literacies: Minority Community Literacies and One U.S. University

Christopher Schroeder



After reviewing results from the Nation's Report Card in Writing, this article presents data from a survey of Latino students, the largest ethnic group of students at Northeastern Illinois University. These data suggest that the Hispanic students at Northeastern are similar to their national Hispanic peers in several ways, such as the levels of parental education and the number of texts in their homes, yet different from them in other ways, such as exposure to English at home or level of involvement with parents and friends. Perhaps most significantly, these students report stronger beliefs in and attitudes about literacy than either their national Hispanic peers or national peers. Although more research is needed, these data indicate the need for new literacy theories and research methods to ensure that these experiences and expectations are legitimized not as educational liabilities but as intellectual assets.

Schools, Harvey Graff has shown, have been a source of literacy instruction as early as the fifth-century BCE in Athens (22 ff). In the United States, organized schools, according to Deborah Keller-Cohen, increasingly supplanted more community-based sites of literacy instruction, such as dame schools, apprenticeships, and homes, since their emergence in the nineteenth century to become the primary means of literacy acquisition (293–94, 299–300). For these and other reasons, schools must be integrated into any adequate account of community literacies if only because schools, as I have argued, are sites where proficiencies and practices—both personal and public—are legitimized or dismissed (Schroeder, *ReInventing*).

At my school—Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago, IL—the literacy expectations are fairly typical. After completing a placement test, most students must pass at least one introductory writing course designed by the English Department to present to students “a variety of formats,” “strategies for invention and revision,” and “fundamentals of argument;” to teach students to critique drafts and sources; and “to edit for grammar, spelling, and mechanical errors.” After completing this course, some of these students—those in the Colleges of Education and Business, but not in Arts and Sciences—must take a second required writing course, which, according to the catalogue description, is a “[c]ontinuation of practice in composition with an emphasis on a variety of forms of writing and longer essays culminating in the annotated research paper.”

In addition to these courses, all students must pass the English Competency Exam, designed, according to the university, to certify “college-level competency” through a multiple-choice reading exam consisting of vocabulary and comprehension sections that must be completed in thirty-five minutes and through a timed writing exam arguing for or against one of several propositions that must be completed in two and one-half hours. And some of them will also be required to write in their other courses, although based upon a recent survey

of faculty, the number of these courses is fewer than even I, a former (and cynical) Writing Across the Curriculum Coordinator, expected.

These expectations will likely surprise no one, given that in one way or another they resemble larger nation-wide expectations that can be traced back to the early 1950s (see, e.g., Sasser). What might be surprising, however, is that my school, according to *U.S. News and World Report*, is the most diverse university in the Midwest and, the second-most diverse in the United States, where the students speak more than fifty different languages. As the Director for the Center for Teaching and Learning explains during introductory seminars for new faculty, Northeastern students differ from their peers in significant ways, such as their family background, employment status, attendance, and academic preparedness. In particular, these students are nearly twice as likely as students at an average four-year public university to be first generation college students or part of the working class, nearly four times as likely to be local, and five times more likely to be comfortable in a language other than English or to be spending 20 hours or more caring for family members when they start at the university (Hansen).

In other words, these students tend to bring a range of linguistic, economic, and educational experiences to classrooms, and tend to be more intimately tied to local communities. While these differences often bring new perspectives and enrich intellectual work, they can be seen as educational and social liabilities, if not outright threats. In this regard, non-native speakers of English, Elliot Judd explains, have always “posed a dilemma” for legislators and policymakers in the State of Illinois (46). In 1845, Illinois legislators declared that no public school could receive public funds unless it provided its instruction in English, and in 1923, they passed a law designating *American* as the official language of Illinois. While the designation was changed in 1969 from *American* to *English*, the message is nonetheless clear, one that has been reiterated in the current national debate over immigration.

For these and other reasons, such as citing community partnerships in its mission statement, Northeastern is a rich location for researching community literacies, so I surveyed incoming students to establish a baseline of experiences and expectations. I confess that at that time, I expected to find little if any experience with or affinity for writing and reading. After all, the National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges reports that nearly all students (97%) spend three or fewer hours on writing assignments each week, which is only a fraction (15%) of the time they spend watching television. Moreover, the Commission explains that nearly 5 of every 10 of high school seniors (49%) are only assigned a paper of three or more pages once or twice a week in their English classes and that almost 4 of every 10 students (39%) are never or hardly ever given such assignments (“Neglected” 20).

If these and other conditions are true of students generally, then surely students with significant educational, economic, and social differences would have even fewer experiences with and less affection for writing and reading. The results, I admit, surprised me, not only in what they suggest about the students at Northeastern, but also how these compare with their national peers. In general, these results suggest complex conditions that at the very least complicate, if not challenge, stereotypes about U.S. minority bilinguals. Although much more needs to be done to understand these students and others like them, their experiences help to highlight the limits of existing literacy models and to suggest some directions for community literacies research.

Some Assumptions and Background

In preparing this survey, I turned, as did the National Commission on Writing, to the Nation's Report Card in Writing, prepared by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP),¹ in order to situate the incoming students to Northeastern in relation to their national peers. Unlike the Commission, I limited my focus to context-specific questions from the 2002 NAEP survey, which was administered to 18,500 twelfth-graders in 700 schools across the country. In contrast to the assessments of writing, these questions addressed students' experiences with and attitudes about writing and reading, both within schools and in their communities, as well as their exposure to newspapers, magazines, and television, their access to and use of computers, and other potential influences upon their expectations for and attitudes toward literacy events, or to expand Shirley Brice Heath's definition slightly, events in which texts are central to social and interpretive interactions (see Heath, "Protean" 93 ff).²

In addition to only focusing upon contextual questions, I also narrowed my focus to Latino students at Northeastern.³ First, Latinos constitute the largest ethnic group on campus (37%), larger than Asian Americans (14%), African Americans (10%), and even European Americans (34%). In fact, Northeastern is an official Hispanic-Serving Institution, as designated by the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute. Second, large Latino populations can be found throughout the community. For example, more than one-fourth (26%) of Chicago is Hispanic, and the city has the second largest population of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in the U.S. (Guzmán). Third, Latinos in Chicago and the surrounding area have been the focus of recent research, such as Ralph Cintron's *Angels' Town* and Marcia Farr's *Latino Language and Literacy in Ethnolinguistic Chicago*.

During the summer and fall of 2004, my survey was distributed to more than 120 Latino students who, having been admitted to Northeastern, were participating in the Summer Transition Program or Proyecto Pa'Lante. According to its brochure, the Summer Transition Program (STP) is an eight-week program designed to assist high school graduates, most of whom are Hispanic, with their transition to Northeastern. By attending special summer classes four days a week from nine to four p.m., students in STP can earn up to six credit hours toward their degrees.

While STP focuses on the transition to Northeastern, Proyecto Pa'Lante is directed to Latinos' experiences during their first and second years at the university. This special admission program was formed in 1972 as a collaborative initiative between the Union for Puerto Rican Students and the Office of Student Affairs in order to provide "academic support services" for Latino students. According to its website, its goal is developing "leadership in the Latino community through education" by "recruiting primarily Latino students who demonstrate academic potential but do not meet the general admission requirements" and by supporting those who have been admitted with advising, tutoring, and counseling, as well as providing an environment that fosters "a positive self-image and a feeling of belonging." In doing so, the program offers a required seminar during the first year that introduces Latino students to various practices, that have been associated with educational success, such as time-management and study skills.⁴

Community Literacies and Higher Education

In general, the NAEP data about twelfth-graders across the country suggest that students applying to U.S. colleges and universities come, not surprisingly, from homes with educated parents where English is predominantly spoken. For example, more than half of their fathers (56%) and even more of their mothers (60%) have had some education after high school with more than 3 of every 10 (35%) of their fathers and mothers having graduated from college, and more than 8 of every 10 (83%) come from homes where English is used most if not all of the time.

The good news is that these homes are reportedly filled with literacy materials. For example, more than 5 of every 10 (55%) report coming from homes that get newspapers regularly, more than 7 of every 10 (75%) report getting magazines regularly, almost 8 of 10 have twenty-six or more books, and 9 of 10 (90%) have computers they can use although more than half of them (51%) watch television or movies two or more hours on school days.

In much the same way, these homes are places with substantial levels of parental involvement in education. For example, almost 8 of every 10 (77%) report that their parents have at least expectations if not strict rules for finishing their homework, and nearly 5 of 10 (48%) report that their parents at least sometimes know when they finish their homework. At the same time, their involvement decreases somewhat in other areas. For example, slightly more than 6 of every 10 (61%) report that their parents have no rules about the amount of television they can watch, and 7 of 10 (70%) report that their parents hardly ever know the amount of television they do watch, on school days.

The bad news, however, is these students report little writing or reading, both in their homes and in schools. While slightly more than 5 of 10 (53%) report that they write e-mail to friends or family at least weekly if not more, nearly 8 of 10 (79%) report that they write in a journal or diary on their own no more than once or twice a month if at all, a condition that increases to more than 8 of every 10 (81%) for writing stories or poems for fun on their own. Regarding reading, nearly 6 of every 10 (59%) report that they read for fun no more than once or twice a month if at all, the same amount who report reading 10 or fewer pages in school or for homework each day, with even slightly more (64%) reporting that they talk with friends or family about something they have read, again, no more than once or twice a month if at all.

A partial explanation might be found in the tension between their beliefs about and attitudes toward literacy. While almost 7 of every 10 (67%) agree or strongly agree that writing helps them share their ideas, less than 4 of every 10 (35%) agree or strongly agree that writing, whether stories or letters, is one of their favorite activities. For reading, the situation is similar: while 8 of every 10 (80%) agree or strongly agree that reading helps them learn much, less than 4 of every 10 (39%) agree or strongly agree that reading is one of their favorite activities.

When Hispanic students are separated from their national peers, the results are mixed.⁵ In some ways, the national Hispanic students resemble their national peers. For example, Hispanic students report similar amounts of television and movies on school days, as well as similar kinds of rules for watching television on school days and similar levels of parental knowledge about whether they completed their homework. In much the same way,

Hispanic students report similar access to computers and use of them for e-mail, similar amounts of writing on their own and in their schools, similar levels of interaction with family and friends about things they have learned or read, and similar levels of agreement about the benefits of and feelings toward writing and reading.

However, in other ways, the national Hispanic students confirm many of the stereotypes about immigrants in the United States. More specifically, Hispanic twelfth-graders across the country report coming from homes with less educated parents, less exposure to English, and fewer texts. For example, less than 4 of every 10 (36%) of their national peers report that their parents have a high school education or less, while nearly 5 of every 10 of Hispanic students' mothers (51%) and fathers (49%) have a similar high school education or less. At the same time, more than 8 of every 10 (83%) of their national peers report using a language other than English only once in a while if ever, only slightly less than 4 of every 10 Hispanic students (39%) can report the same. In a similar way, Hispanic students report coming from homes with consistently fewer newspapers, magazines, and books.

When these results are juxtaposed against the results from Hispanic students at Northeastern, the situation becomes even more complicated. More specifically, their homes are similar to yet different from their national Hispanic counterparts. Regarding education, the Hispanics at Northeastern resemble their national Hispanic counterparts in their differences from their national peers, yet in regards to language, the Hispanics at Northeastern are more likely than even their national Hispanic peers to use another language at home. In much the same way, the Hispanic students at Northeastern report similar kinds and numbers of texts in their homes as their national Hispanic peers, which are fewer in kind and number than those of their national peers, although they report similar access to and use of computers and television as both their national Hispanic peers and their national peers. In contrast, slightly more than 6 of every 10 Hispanic students (61%) report that they come from homes where a language other than English is used half of the time or more, yet the number increases to more than 8 of every 10 (83%) of Hispanic students at Northeastern.

At the same time, the Hispanic students at Northeastern report greater levels of involvement with parents and friends than either their Hispanic peers or their national peers. In particular, the Hispanic students at Northeastern report that their parents generally know more often how much television they watch on school days and that their parents generally have stricter rules for finishing homework than those of their Hispanic and national peers. For example, more than 6 of every 10 of the Hispanic students at Northeastern (66%) report that their parents sometimes if not usually know how much time they spend watching television on school days as contrasted with less than 2 of every 10 of their national Hispanic peers (19%) and national peers (16%). In much the same way, the Hispanic students at Northeastern report that they are more likely than their national and Hispanic peers to talk with friends and families about something they studied or read. For instance, more than 5 of every 10 of the Hispanic students at Northeastern (54%) talk to family or friends 1–2 times a week or more about something they have read as contrasted with less than 4 of every 10 of their national Hispanic counterparts (35%) and their national peers (35%).

Although the Hispanic students at Northeastern report similar levels and uses for writing and reading as their national Hispanic and national peers, they report stronger beliefs in and attitudes about literacy. Regarding writing, 9 of every 10 Hispanic students at North-

eastern (93%) agree or strongly agree that writing helps them share their ideas, as opposed to slightly more than 6 of every 10 (61%) of their national Hispanic peers and less than 7 of every 10 (67%) of their national peers, and 5 of every 10 (50%) agree or strongly agree that writing, whether stories or letters, is one of their favorite activities as compared to 4 of every 10 or fewer of their national Hispanic peers (40%) and their national peers (35%). As for reading, 8 of every 10 or more of all of the students agree or strongly agree that reading helps them learn much, yet 5 of every 10 of the Hispanic students at Northeastern agree or strongly agree that reading is one of their favorite activities, as opposed to less than 4 of every 10 of their national Hispanic (37%) and their national (39%) peers.

If we are to understand the everyday literacies of these students and others like them, we must consider not only bilingualism and writing, as Guadalupe Valdés argues, but also the fusion of transnationalism and cultural hybridity...

U.S. Universities and Community Literacies

Regarding the students who are applying to our institutions, the situation is decidedly mixed. On one hand, they are coming from homes with educated parents and ample texts, yet on the other, they do little writing and reading, and do not like to write or read, even though they strongly believe in

the benefits of literacy. While, according to NAEP, Hispanic students generally come from homes with less education and less exposure to English than do their national peers, they engage in similar amounts and kinds of writing and reading, as well as have similar beliefs about and attitudes toward literacy. In other words, these data suggest that some parts of stereotypes about immigrants in the U.S.—such as educational levels or language use, seem accurate—yet other parts—particularly inferences about literacy—are not.

Based upon the data I collected, the Hispanic students at Northeastern are similar to their national Hispanic peers in terms of the educational levels of their parents and their exposure to texts in their homes. At the same time, these students are more likely than their national Hispanic counterparts to use a language other than English at home, and they are more likely than their national Hispanic peers and their national peers to interact with their parents. In addition, they believe in and enjoy writing and reading more than their national Hispanic and national peers even as they write and read in similar amounts and ways.

A partial explanation for these conditions could be differences in gender within the groups. While their national peers and national Hispanic peers are evenly split between females (51%) and males (49%), the Hispanic students at Northeastern who were surveyed are more female (65%) than male (35%), so one question is whether the results would be the same with more males, although such disproportion exists in Proyecto Pa'Lante as well (Fuentes). A greater challenge could be that the Hispanic students at Northeastern are a self-selected group—one that enrolls in postsecondary education—as compared or contrasted with their national peers, Hispanic or otherwise. Nevertheless, such challenges do not alter the fact that any generalizations made about the Hispanic students at Northeastern, whether based upon stereotypes or national data, would be uninformed at best.

Obviously, much more needs to be done in order to understand not only the Latino students at Northeastern but also Northeastern students or Hispanic students or even students generally. One possibility is to further analyze these data in light of different Hispanic groups. In particular, 6 of every 10 (60%) of national Hispanic students, and nearly 7 of every 10 (69%) of Hispanics at Northeastern, are Mexican or Mexican American, which suggest even more complications. On one hand, these data seem to confirm the assertion made by Marcia Farr about Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in Chicago, who, she suggests, often have elaborate social networks beyond schools that contribute to their efforts to meet their everyday literacy needs (“*En Los Dos Idiomas*”). On the other hand, they raise questions about whether these Hispanics, both at Northeastern and nationally, are what John Ogbu calls *involuntary minorities*, or those, including African Americans or Native Americans, for whom mainstream linguistic and cultural standards are not obstacles to overcome, as they are for *voluntary minorities* such as Asian Americans, but threats to resist.

Regarding this relationship to mainstream linguistic and cultural standards, I agree about the significance of the difference between those who have chosen to come to the U.S. and those who have had the choice made for them, yet I believe, based upon my experiences with Latino students at Northeastern, that these conditions are more permeable—more dependent upon perception and a host of other variables—especially for Generation 1.5⁶ and subsequent generations. In fact, preliminary research suggests, for example, that while those, such as Richard Rodriguez, who are not motivated to use Spanish at home often become isolated from their families, those who do not need to use English at home often experience a motivation to master this language that is academic in at least two senses (see, e.g., Del Valle; Potowski).

At the same time, other research indicates that those minority bilinguals who have received most of their education in the U.S. will be more comfortable with spoken (i.e., context-embedded) forms of English, in which meaning is negotiated, yet they will struggle more with the context-reduced language of the university than international bilinguals who arrive in the U.S. having experienced the context-reduced language in their education within their countries of origin (Muchisky and Tangren). Similar experiences might be true of those who have been classified as Spanish Heritage Speakers, or those raised in homes where Spanish is spoken and who can at least understand Spanish if not speak it. Again, preliminary research suggests that Spanish Heritage Speakers who are learning to write in Spanish do so in ways that are distinctly different from native Spanish speakers and those who are learning Spanish as a second language (Spicer-Escalante). Such conditions can only complicate an already complex relationship between language and ethnic identity that, according to some, is different for Latinos in the United States than for other minority immigrant groups (Gonzalez xv; see also Cohen).

If we are to understand the everyday literacies of these students and others like them, we must consider not only *bilingualism* and *writing*, as Guadalupe Valdés argues, but also the fusion of transnationalism and cultural hybridity that, as Ralph Cintron points out, is central to understanding the experiences of Latinos in Chicago and, I would add, minority bilinguals in other regions of the United States (Valdés; Cintron 381 ff). In the meantime, these data can provide a basis for theorizing about schools within accounts of literacy in the twenty-first century. On the whole, these conditions, and others like them, are likely to be seen as educational and social liabilities to overcome or escape.

In part, this perspective is a result of existing language policies within U.S. universities and U.S. society. According to Bruce Horner and John Trimbur, these policies, which were “institutionalized around the turn of the century, at the high tide of imperialism, colonial adventure, and overseas missionary societies,” are policies of “unidirectional monolingualism,” based upon a “chain of reification” that defines “social identity as language use” and “language as standard written English” as well as language development as “fixed in its order, direction, and sociopolitical significance” (608, 596). In addition to generating a tacit English Only policy, these assumptions are so pervasive and so powerful that they can be seen, Horner and Trimbur argue, in arguments for *and* against English Only, both of which presuppose the “legitimacy of a primarily monolingual culture,” a “fixed status of English itself,” and the “single direction for language learning” as “competence in English,” as well as the assumption that the mastery of English “accounts for the social status of ethnic groups,” not to mention a denial of the “material costs” of a multilingual society (608–18).

Horner and Trimbur are correct to identify the tacit language policies within U.S. universities and U.S. societies, and their analysis of the underlying assumptions, even among purported allies, is dishearteningly accurate. However, they run the risk of minimizing the hegemony of existing linguistic and social prejudice by focusing on such obvious issues as language itself or upon English Only arguments. In order to understand the extent of this prejudice, such criticisms must be linked to larger critiques of prevailing theoretical models of literacy.

Such conditions can be seen in recent research in Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), as recommended by leading WAC theorists. Calling themselves “pioneers in the field” who “know the WAC territory” and “have explored and helped to map it inch by inch, planting flags on behalf of students,” Susan McLeod and Elaine Maimon explain that after “listening to a featured speaker at a recent WPA conference” define WAC in ways that neither recognized, they “decided that it was time to expose the myths surrounding WAC, to clear the air, to set the record straight” (573). While the main focus of their argument is to challenge four “myths” about WAC and to offer their own definition, McLeod and Maimon conclude by identifying “models of the kinds of work scholars of WAC should aspire to”: John Bean’s *Engaging Ideas*, Christopher Thaiss’ *The Harcourt Brace Guide for Writing Across the Curriculum*, and Art Young’s *Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum* (582). These, in their own words, offer “a fair and realistic view of WAC” and “draw upon *praxis* as well as theory,” and they enable those who are interested in WAC “to move forward without the promulgation of myths that obscure and distort scholarly exchange” (582).

Even a casual glance suggests that the goal of writing, according to these, is to socialize students into academic ways of thinking with little regard to the conditions of students except as starting points in the socialization process. This socialization is the ostensive goal of writing to learn, which Thaiss justifies as a means of “initiating students into academic life” by providing “the tools to collect, evaluate, and express information as professionals do” (13). Moreover, writing to learn and writing to communicate, Young maintains, creates “a middle ground of conversational language and learning” that nonetheless serves as a space “where students gain knowledge, develop scholarly habits of mind, and acquire rhetorical competence in a variety of public and academic contexts” (58). Any alternatives, if acknowledged at all, are relegated to the margins, as illustrated in a chapter by Bean in which after devoting more than twenty-one of twenty-three pages to thesis-driven argument, he mentions other options that span less than one and one-half pages (73–96).

According to such accounts, literacy becomes the mastery of discourse, or specific discourses for Writing in the Disciplines proponents. In the words of David Bartholomae's ironic and often-cited description, students must "appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse" as if they are full-fledged participants within the university or within disciplines (135). Such definitions can be found within literacy studies as well. For instance, James Paul Gee defines literacy as the "mastery of a secondary Discourse," or a particular "saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combination" (143, 127).⁷ These accounts lead to discussions about the discourse of historians or lawyers, as if these are static entities into which people are socialized through acquisition, or exposure, and learning, or conscious study (138). In other words, historians or lawyers use the same discourse or, at the very least can (and novices should) do so.

Such accounts constitute semi-autonomous models of literacy, to qualify Brian Street's characterization, while acknowledging disciplinary contexts dismiss larger differences such as the ones brought by the Latino students at Northeastern.⁸ Within semi-autonomous models of literacy, the mode is presumed to be standard written English, and the means is a one-way socialization process. The goal seems to be to adopt mainstream practices and habits (e.g. Gee or Heath).

Such goals have been criticized by some, as J. Elspeth Stuckey does of Heath's denial of larger socioeconomic conditions in *Ways With Words* (Stuckey 6). To these criticisms, I want to add that such solutions presume the illegitimacy of these differences. In fact, semi-autonomous models of literacy designate the conditions of Hispanic students at Northeastern, and not incidentally most students, to be *deficiently different* at best, if not *differently deficient* in spite of the efforts of Mina Shaughnessy and others to resist such conclusions.

Given these and other limitations, I believe that those of us interested in community literacies must find ways to ensure that these conditions are legitimized not as educational liabilities but as intellectual assets. However, such an outcome, at the moment, might not be possible even with existing models of community literacy, which cannot account for the complexity of these experiences. In an article entitled "Community Literacy," Wayne Campbell Peck, Linda Flower, and Lorraine Higgins distinguish among *cultural literacy*, which "creates a discourse that seeks to minimize or eradicate difference," *the literacy of social and cultural critique*, which "openly addresses issues of power, defining social relationships in terms of economic and ideological struggle," and *community literacy*, which "is a search for an alternative discourse" that "embraces four key aims" of supporting "*social change*" and "*intercultural conversation*" and using "*a strategic approach*" and "*inquiry*" (203–06, original italics).

Throughout the article, the authors turn to the work of the Community House and the National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy at Carnegie Mellon to illustrate their efforts "to articulate a vision of community literacy" through "negotiated meaning making, an attempt to respond to an array of conflicts and constraints, to some of the competing goals, forces, and voices that shape the discussion of literacy" (206). For instance, the authors describe efforts to represent "the viewpoints of all stakeholders at the table—in this case a mediator, community organizer, landlord, and tenant" through generating "a useful document that might lead to change," a process that involved, they explain, modifying "the relatively analytical style of the planning prompts into a narrative style that more people felt comfortable with" (219). Based upon this and other examples, the authors contend that

they “build broader tables of conversation, writing, consensus, and action at the grassroots of urban communities” as an “intercultural and multi-vocal” community literacy “practiced as people cross boundaries, share various perspectives, and move into action” (220).

Though valuable for depicting different “stakeholders,” this account fails to demonstrate how integrating analytic and narrative styles leads to “hybrid, intercultural discourses” (212). This problem is even more obvious in Flower’s other, and even later, work in community literacies, in which she articulates what she calls a social cognitive theory as a means to intercultural rhetoric that draws upon cultural differences to generate knowledge and action (“Intercultural” 239 ff; see also *Construction*). In these and other accounts, Flower relies upon a reified notion of discourse—“the elite discourses of policy, regional talk, social services and academic analysis” as relatively coherent and uniform—that resembles WAC theorists and those of mainstream composition and literacy research (250). Moreover, she ignores the politics of literacy although such a move, given her initial work in cognitive rhetoric, is not surprising.

Fortunately for the Latino students at Northeastern and for current researchers in literacy, such semi-autonomous models are increasingly being challenged. For example, A. Suresh Canagarajah documents the link between material conditions and extensive textual, social, and cultural differences for what he calls center and periphery scholars, two different positions that he has occupied at different times as a student and an academic in Sri Lanka and the United States (*Geopolitics*). Even within U.S. universities, such models ignore the experiences of practicing academics, such as those interviewed by Thaiss, the model WAC researcher, and Terry Myers Zawacki, who recognizes varieties even within mainstream disciplines (Thaiss and Zawacki). The greater irony here is that the limits of such models have long been recognized by students, as illustrated by Victor Villanueva’s account of his efforts, as a student, at what he calls professorial discourse analysis, which involved analyzing previous publications by his teachers and then imitating them for their required assignments (71).

If the experiences reported by the Latino students at Northeastern are to be intellectual assets and not educational and social liabilities, a new model of literacy will be needed. Given these data, one of the more promising directions is syncretism, or the integration of competing cultural practices, that has been used to account for Samoan American homes or Mexican Catholicism in the U.S. (Duranti and Ochs; Farr, “Literacy”). On one hand, such directions have already been sketched out within literacy studies, as seen in the discussions of multiliteracies (see, e.g., Barton, Hamilton, and Ivani or Cope and Kalantzis). Even within composition studies, such an approach would not be entirely new (see, e.g., Camitta or Dyson) although these accounts have largely been limited to English-speaking subjects. On the other hand, any such approach must address both syntactical dimensions, as Canagarajah points out, and larger sociocultural networks, as explored by Charles Bazerman and David Russell (Canagarajah, “Place” 595; Bazerman and Russell).

Before we can legitimize these practices and proficiencies, we must first document and understand them. To these ends, a useful approach is the one developed by Norma González, Luis C. Moll, and Cathy Amanti. Called “funds of knowledge,” this approach starts in homes, uses ethnographies to document “social relationships and practices,” relies upon study groups, and forges “collaborative and reciprocal relationships” with teachers and families

even as it allows for “modifications to local contexts” (Moll 286). The advantage is the presumption of legitimacy given to households and other community-specific sites as sources of “funds of knowledge”; although as described in the collection edited by González, Moll, and Amanti, this approach leaves unanswered the question about the implications.

In other words, do these documented “funds of knowledge” merely facilitate the transition of the Hispanic students and others like them into academic and social institutions? For example, are we to permit these students to use Spanish in their reading journals because Spanish, for many, is more comfortable, which allows us to focus more on the larger habits of mind and other privileged practices in U.S. universities? Or do these results challenge existing curricula and institutional practices with new forms of intellectual work? For instance, are we to encourage the use of Spanish (or *confianza en confianza* cited by González, Moll, and Amanti [5 ff], or *cuentos*, or other practices) because these allow for new forms of intellectual work?

The latter is the speculative conclusion of a collection of essays I proposed to and co-edited with Helen Fox and Patricia Bizzell called *ALT DIS: Alternative Discourses and the Academy*. This project was recently cited by Canagarajah as an example of the “most progressive” in composition and then criticized, fairly I believe, for not being progressive enough (“Place” 595). Part of the problem, I have discovered, is that while these differences can be documented and legitimized on a case-by-case basis, as Rakesh M. Bhatt has done with Indian Englishes, they must also be shown to be more widespread if they are to be more than isolated examples, if they are, in fact, to represent legitimate alternatives. To such an end, an approach that combines qualitative and quantitative methods, such as the one used by Ana Celia Zentella in *Growing Up Bilingual*, can produce both thick descriptions and bigger pictures.

Ultimately, the benefits of such methods and theories, I believe, will extend beyond the Latino students at Northeastern to students and intellectuals generally. However, that is a different argument for a different day.⁹

Appendix: Survey Questions (Clustered)

Personal Information

- What is your gender?
- Which [race/ethnicity] best describes you?
- If you are Hispanic, what is your Hispanic background?

Homes

Parental Education

- How far in school did your father go?
- How far in school did your mother go?

Language

- How often do people in your home talk to each other in a language other than English?

Presence/Absence of Literacy Materials

- Is there a world atlas in your home? It could be a book of maps of the world, or it could be on the computer.
- About how many books are there in your home?

- Is there a computer at home that you use?
- Is there an encyclopedia in your home? It could be a set of books, or it could be on the computer.
- Does your family get any magazines regularly?
- Does your family get a newspaper at least four times a week?

Parental Involvement

- On a school day, about how many hours do you usually watch TV or videotapes outside of school?
- Did your parents know whether you finished your homework each day?
- Did your parents know the amount of time you spent watching TV on a school day?
- Which statement best describes the rules that your parents have about getting your homework done?
- Which statement best describes the rules that your parents have about the amount of TV you can watch on school days?

Experiences With and Uses for Writing and Reading

- About how many pages a day did you have to read in school and for homework?
- How often do you read for fun on your own time?
- How often do you talk about things you studied in school with someone in your family?
- How often do you talk with your friends or family about something you have read?
- How often do you write e-mails to your friends or family?
- How often do you write in a private journal or diary on your own time?
- How often do you write stories or poems for fun on your own time?

Belief In and Attitudes about Literacy

- Please indicate how much you disagree or agree with the following statement:
When I read books, I learn a lot.
- Please indicate how much you disagree or agree with the following statement:
Reading is one of my favorite activities.
- Please indicate how much you disagree or agree with the following statement:
Writing helps me share my ideas.
- Please indicate how much you disagree or agree with the following statement:
Writing things like stories and letters is one of my favorite activities.

Notes

¹ As a part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, Congress called for national assessment, which led in 1969 to the National Assessment of Educational Progress to evaluate reading, math, science, history, geography, and writing in schools across the country (see Elliot 196 ff). At the present, NAEP collects and provides data on students in grades four, eight, and twelve in the areas of civics, geography, U.S. history, mathematics, reading, science, and writing.

² For a complete list of questions, see the Appendix.

³ In this report, I tend to use Latino, which seems to be the preferred term, although when discussing reports of data that use Hispanic, I use that term.

⁴For Fall 2004, Proyecto Pa'Lante reported 294 candidates, 154 interviews, and 110 admissions, of whom 97 were attending in Spring 2005 (Fuentes).

⁵In analyzing these data, I relied upon a differential of 10% to indicate substantial similarity or difference. In other words, any results that were within 10% for different groups were considered similar enough to report, and any that were more than 10% were considered different enough to report.

⁶Generation 1.5 refers to immigrants who have had most if not all of their education in the U.S. For more on Generation 1.5 and writing, see Harklau, Losey, and Siegal.

⁷Although Gee distinguishes between primary Discourses, “or those to which people are apprenticed early in life during their primary socialization as members of particular families within their sociocultural settings,” and secondary Discourses, “or those to which people are apprenticed as a part of their socializations within various local, state, and national groups and institutions outside early home and peer-group socialization,” he nonetheless relies upon a definition of discourse as a monolithic, homogeneous theoretical construct.

⁸According to Street, autonomous models of literacy are “defined in technical terms” and “independent of social context” (2).

⁹I wish to thank Carlos LeBron, Teresita Diaz, Manuel Cuba, Neida Hernandez-Santamaria, and Pedro Fuentes for their assistance with collecting the survey data, as well as Therese Schuepfer for her assistance with the data analysis.

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