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Book Review

A Pedagogy of Powerful Communication: Youth Radio and Radio Arts in the Multilingual Classroom

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A Pedagogy of Powerful Communication: Youth Radio and Radio Arts in the Multilingual Classroom by Dana Walker (2014). New York: Peter Lang.

A Pedagogy of Powerful Communication is a welcome look at what can happen when a team of adults works with a team of students to create something new, with language learning, community involvement, digital literacy, and identity exploration in mind. It is part of a book series edited by Shirley Steinberg and Pepi Leistyna called "Minding the Media," which is described by the editors as promoting "critical, creative alternatives to contemporary mainstream practices," and it certainly delivers in that category. While many English as a Second Language (ESL) classes prioritize vocabulary acquisition and usage, with the main or only goal being to improve students' English, the project that Dana Walker designs, implements, and describes in this book instead takes an additive approach to teaching English Learners (ELs), leveraging and building on their native languages whenever possible, and including as a priority, in addition to language development, development of self and communication with others. Even more unique is how media literacy practices like youth media production are at the heart of the work. The result is, as Walker explains, a creation of the "conditions for a pedagogy of powerful communication," and one that other media educators would do well to emulate, I might add.

Walker, an associate professor at the University of Northern Colorado's College of Education and Behavioral Sciences, has directed and researched youth media arts and poetry programs since 2000, and has previously published on the topic of youth radio. For this book, Walker describes a yearlong study in which she collaborated with two teachers and multiple community-based media and arts practitioners and mentors to guide an ESL Study Skills and Academic Support class of 16-18 students in grades 9-11 through the process of learning about and producing youth commentary for community radio. Using transcribed conversations with students and field notes from class activities, among other data sources, Walker illustrates and analyzes changing, growing attitudes, identities and abilities of the participating students.

With wide ranging aims falling mainly under the categories of media production, community engagement, student confidence, and language development, the project is a mightily ambitious and admirable one. To the tune of the first aim, media production, Walker shares several examples of compositions students prepared, edited and delivered for and on the radio, like the transcripts of students' stories for the radio. For the second aim, community engagement, we see students' attitudes and self images are positively shaped when bilingual experts from the community are treated as sources of legitimate knowledge. As Walker herself stated, "The use of and

indexing of multiple linguistic codes served to validate Spanish as an appropriate form of communication, allowing participants to experience Spanish and Spanish speakers from a non-deficit perspective" (169).

Student confidence, the third aim, is well documented but perhaps captured best by Walker's humble claim: "It is possible to argue… that Youth Radio provided a 'thinking space' for reflecting on and representing the young people's questioning and theorizing, for speaking up and acting out against what Freire has called 'the culture of silence'" (48). Comments from students about their developing sense of social responsibility and the right to speak out support the achievement of this aim (156). The fourth and final aim, of language development, is captured by an in-depth explanation of how one student gained "a sense of power over her oral language production, which is significant for a person positioned as less-than-competent in the dominant language" (136).

While the success of these aims is described in terms of moves made by the teachers and gains made by the students, not enough acknowledgement is given to the influence on class dynamics of Federico, the charming, outgoing visiting teacher who used movement, play, and humor to "let the students' spirits out." Based on how his interactions with the students are described, though they may have been brief in the scope of the whole project, they are probably a major variable in the success of students' development. In chapter four, Walker muses that she is "[led] to believe that there was something about the way Federico communicated—the way he drew out students' ideas and experiences, the embodiment of his *consejos* (elder advice) in familiar gestures and discursive practices, and pointedly encouraging students to use their bodies to internalize the concepts presented—that made a mark" (96). She is recognizing the powerful impact Federico's theatrical presence had on the students by breaking through the haze of traditional classroom norms, but the accounts of such practices remain a minor player in the overall story of how things worked, and Federico's own voice in the form of personal reflections or quotes about this work are curiously absent. While teacher personality and interpersonal dynamics are, of course, difficult to measure in any quantifiable way, researchers like Stephen W. Tonelson (1981), Jim Flaitz (1987), and Darrell Fisher and Harry Kent (1998) have tried to do just that and have concluded that teacher personality does in fact play a major role in student learning. More recent research by Amir Mahdavi Zafarghandi, Sepideh Salehi, and Masoud Khalil Sabet (2016) explicitly linking teacher personality and socio-communicative styles to the outcomes of ELs in particular would seem to support the observation that Federico's extroverted connectedness to students was a factor in Walker's findings.

Other important factors in the success of the work that could have been more heavily highlighted include: students' interactions with mentors like Kareem and Tim; the "hot, home-cooked, healthful snacks" (93) served during after-school work sessions; authentic community involvement and recognition of and by school janitors Jose and Craig; and actual use of technology, programs and equipment, like the beat machine, VoxPops, and web content development basics that are essentially mentioned in passing. More information about these components would make for a richer representation of the project; instead, the majority of Walker's book involves transcripts of conversations with students, as discussed below. When Walker does turn her attention to describing students' interactions with the mentors, for instance, the result is powerful anecdotal evidence that taking students' ideas seriously pays off. In chapter four, she offers a beautiful example of mentor Kareem engaging in conversation with a student over time to guide him toward questioning rather than shutting him down from a position of authority by telling him that his portrayal of drug traffickers as heroes was wrong (92). Of course, some adults' knee-jerk reaction would be to immediately set that opinion straight, but if, from the student's perspective, drug traffickers have appeared heroic, then an adult's dismissal of that wouldn't mean much. If, however, the adult listens over time and the student shares the reasons why they might have that opinion, then there's an opportunity to ask questions from a place of trust (or *confianza*, in Spanish, as Walker alludes to several times as an important element to the project) that might move the student's thinking to see the role of drug traffickers differently. That type of patience, along with, of course, hot, home-cooked, healthful snacks, cannot be underestimated in terms of improving students' school experiences. Teacher educators using the book with pre-

service teachers may want to point to these interpersonal details about educating the whole child as important, and media educators looking for ideas to engage ELs may also wish to consider these elements.

In contrast to the elements described above that could have been highlighted more, some pieces of the book were over-emphasized. An abundance of raw data was provided, mostly in the form of transcripts of one-on-one conversations with students and in-class activities, but more documentation of some of the out-of-class work with the mentors at the actual radio station is needed to provide a fuller picture of the work this class did. Conversational and in-class transcripts, as well as full student responses, could have been captured more succinctly, with selected quotes serving to highlight or substantiate thematic findings—especially with a group of students so small to begin with—, and it could be more useful to see ideas presented in summary rather than individually, through repeatedly cited direct quotes from student conversations.

In terms of power and control, Walker's introductory description of herself as a white professor co-opting an urban classroom (16) is an important one, which contributes to her role in the work. The constant "translation" of students' narratives into Walker's interpreted analyses feels slightly unsettling, taking into account the unequal power dynamic she describes; not everything they uttered needed to be interpreted into scholarly sounding findings. At several points, Walker describes "*allowing* students to bring their own knowledge into the classroom" and *allowing* dialectical differences from standard English in students' final products (25, 33, emphasis added), when it might be better to reframe those scenarios as *encouraging* or *inviting* students to do those things. However, one could read the use of "allowing" as a conscious acknowledgement of the teacher/researcher's own power in the classroom.

Overall, Walker has designed and described a powerful yearlong endeavor to engage ELs in meaningful, authentic work that provides "opportunities to develop expressive language," which can "come rarely for students who have to take ESL classes instead of electives" in high school (171). Since the "Minding the Media" book series is specifically designed to address the needs of students and teachers in watching, comprehending, and using media, and since the audience most likely to benefit from this study would be high school teachers, it could perhaps have an even greater reach and impact if it were presented as a curriculum package, with linked resources, rubrics, assignments and a timeline. There are several tables and rubrics that educators may find particularly useful in attempting to recreate this type of learning experience, but a timeline of exercises and assignments would be a practical addition. Pre-service ESL teachers could benefit from being introduced to this type of work because of its unique and important integration of media production in particular, so teacher educators may want to consider using the book as a way to develop curricula for that group.

In her conclusion, Walker writes that "[t]his study suggest[s] that to break the cycle of remedial ESL instruction that reproduces the marginalization of poor and immigrant students, we must shift our attention from language skills and exercises in communicative competencies to creating the conditions for a *pedagogy of powerful communication*" (167). The project she has designed, implemented and documented represents a way to turn that ideological shift into action in the classroom, and if it can be repeated, the number of English Learners able to reap the benefits of community engagement and media production on the way to language and confidence development will multiply. My only wish would be that a project like this would become so commonplace as to not call for an entire book to be written about it.

References

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