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Culturally Responsive Instruction as a Dimension of New Literacies

Kathryn H. Au

In this article I discuss the concept of cultural responsiveness in literacy instruction. My thesis is that culturally responsive instruction can bring students of diverse backgrounds to high levels of literacy by promoting engagement through activities that reflect the values, knowledge, and structures of interaction that students bring from the home. Culturally responsive instruction may create new literacies in classrooms, literacies that connect to students' home backgrounds.

Related Postings from the Archives

- "You Don't *Read* a Science Book, You *Study* It" by Jim Anderson and Lee Gunderson
- Literacy in Multicultural Settings by Angela Ward

High Levels of Literacy | Narrowing of the Curriculum | Culturally Responsive Instruction | Making Literacy Meaningful | Misconceptions | Sense of Community | Culturally Responsive Texts | Conclusion | References

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High Levels of Literacy

Much of my work has centered on equity pedagogy, one of the dimensions of multicultural education identified by Banks (1995). In particular, I have been interested in culturally responsive instruction that leads students of diverse backgrounds to educational equality in literacy achievement. By students of diverse backgrounds, I mean those who are culturally or ethnically diverse, speak a nondominant first language, and come from poor families. For example, most of the students I have studied are Native Hawaiian, speakers of Hawaii Creole English (a nonmainstream variety of English), and from families on welfare. Results of large-scale testing, such as that conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (Donahue, Voelkl, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999, online document), document the existence of a literacy achievement gap. This gap indicates that the literacy achievement of students of diverse backgrounds, on the whole, lags behind that of their mainstream peers.

The distribution of questions on the 1998 NAEP reading test is indicative of the kind of thinking about text needed to show high literacy achievement in contemporary society. About 55 percent of the questions were relatively straightforward (requiring an initial understanding and some interpretation), but about 45 percent required students to provide a personal response or take a critical stance. The shift toward

personal response and higher level or critical thinking is significant, and in keeping with the rise in literacy demands over the past hundred years (Kaestle, Damon-Moore, Stedman, Tinsley, & Trollinger, 1991). If students of diverse backgrounds are to compete with their mainstream peers, their instruction must take them beyond the basics to higher level thinking with text.

When I refer to literacy achievement, I have in mind a full range of literacy motivations, contextual and literary knowledge, strategies, and skills. In my view, students of diverse backgrounds deserve instruction based on a broad view of literacy, including both affective and cognitive dimensions, and higher evel thinking as well as lower level skills such as phonics. Certainly it is more accurate to speak of "literacies," rather than literacy in a generic or autonomous sense, because reading and writing are embedded in discourse communities shaped by differing cultural knowledge bases, practices, and values (Gee, 1990). However, my focus here is students' access to the kind of literacy achievement that opens doors to opportunities in the larger society. This kind of literacy achievement includes what Delpit (1988) calls the codes of the culture of power.

I see the task of improving the literacy achievement of students of diverse backgrounds as an extremely urgent one, for the sake of the students and their families and for the larger society. In the United States, these students make up an increasing proportion of the school-age population, particularly in low-income areas, where social and economic difficulties continue to mount. While the literacy achievement gap is but one manifestation of a whole constellation of issues, it constitutes a specific target to which educators can direct their efforts.

I became interested in culturally responsive instruction because I wanted to identify classroom literacy experiences that would lead students of diverse backgrounds to high levels of literacy. Like Delpit (1991), I am concerned that students of diverse backgrounds receive literacy instruction that will lead them to become thinkers, not just workers. Without extensive experience with higher level thinking -- the kind of thinking that includes synthesizing information from different sources, evaluating that information critically, and applying it in relevant contexts -- students of diverse backgrounds are likely to have few opportunities for advancement in an economy centered on information and services, rather than manufacturing and agriculture. Their chances to participate in the social, cultural, and political arenas will be similarly limited.

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Narrowing of the Curriculum

In this context, I believe that one of the typical patterns in schools that must be addressed is the narrowing of the literacy curriculum. One manifestation of this typical pattern is seen in the push to "raise scores" as a way of improving the literacy achievement of students of diverse backgrounds. The scores referred to are those on standardized tests. Scores on standardized tests are highly correlated with family income (Ascher, 1990), and many students of diverse backgrounds are from low-

income families. Therefore, schools with large numbers of students from diverse backgrounds come under the greatest pressure to raise scores.

Standardized tests are changing with the times, but in most instances they continue to measure knowledge of skills in isolation rather than the application of skills in the context of reading and writing for meaningful purposes. Teaching to the test, in order to raise scores, often results in a narrowing of the curriculum and an emphasis on rote forms of skill instruction (Smith, 1991). Efforts to raise scores may actually work against bringing students of diverse backgrounds to high levels of literacy, because time and instruction are taken away from developing students' ability to make personal responses or to think critically about texts.

Another manifestation of the typical pattern of a narrowing of the literacy curriculum in the United States is the recent trend toward mandated programs in low-income schools. This movement was precipitated by the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration program passed by Congress in 1998. One of the dangers with mandated programs is that they tend to downplay teachers' decision making and professional judgment (Buly & Rose, 2001). Teachers in mandated programs may feel less encouraged to be reflective about their practices and to make the instructional adjustments needed to reach students of diverse backgrounds. Another danger is that instruction in the most popular mandated programs generally focuses on lower level skills and gives students of diverse backgrounds little opportunity to develop higher level thinking about text.

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Culturally Responsive Instruction

I see culturally responsive instruction as a thread or theme running through literacy curricula aimed at helping students of diverse backgrounds achieve high levels of literacy. The idea behind culturally responsive instruction is that teaching approaches build upon the strengths that students bring from their home cultures, instead of ignoring these strengths or requiring that students learn through approaches that conflict with their cultural values. Culturally responsive instruction fosters new literacies that make connections to students' home cultures. The teachers I have studied organized their instruction around the writers' workshop and the process approach to writing (Graves, 1983) and the readers' workshop and literature-based instruction (Raphael & Au, 1998), although culturally responsive instruction may be part of other approaches as well.

Culturally responsive instruction has the goal of helping students grasp academic concepts through means and content responsive to their cultural values and practices. For example, I studied teachers who allowed Hawaiian children to participate in reading lessons following rules similar to those in talk story, a Hawaiian community speech event (Au & Mason, 1981). In these talk story-like reading lessons, children were able to speak when they had something to say, without waiting for the teacher to call on them. They formulated answers to the teacher's questions collaboratively, by speaking in rhythmic alternation with a great deal of overlapping speech. This manner of speaking reflects the value many Hawaiian

families attach to cooperation and working for the good of the group, rather than to individual achievement. Culturally responsive instruction goes beyond surface features to express respect for cultural values.

Talk story-like reading lessons are what I call "hybrid events," incorporating features of both community and school. Hybrid events foster literate activities that resemble, but are not identical to, those in the community and school. In this case, the new activity is teacher-guided discussion of literature following talk story-like participation structures. These discussions are a new literacy that makes connections to students' home culture.

A couple of a caveats should be discussed at this point. While culturally responsive instruction is a powerful construct, it is certainly not the entire answer to bringing students of diverse backgrounds to high levels of literacy. It cannot be claimed that culturally responsive instruction is either a necessary or a sufficient condition for the successful literacy education of students of diverse backgrounds. In terms of necessity, Hollins (1990) identified approaches such as the Chicago Mastery Learning Program that improved achievement without a consideration of students' cultural backgrounds. (Of course, the view of literacy in that program is not the view advocated here.) In terms of sufficiency, I found in an early study that culturally responsive instruction, in the form of talk story-like participation structures, was only one of more than 30 features essential to an effective classroom reading program for Hawaiian children (Au & Blake, 1984). The case I would like to make for culturally responsive instruction should be seen in light of these limitations.

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Making Literacy Meaningful

One claim to be made for culturally responsive instruction is that it can make school literacy learning personally meaningful and rewarding for students of diverse backgrounds. This benefit gives culturally responsive instruction a place in literacy curricula aimed at improving students' higher level thinking about text, including their personal responses to literature. Culturally responsive instruction would appear to offer less benefit in literacy curricula focused on the rote learning of lower level skills, where personal meaning making is not a goal.

This part of the argument in favor of culturally responsive instruction was developed by D'Amato (1988). Unlike their mainstream peers, D'Amato suggests, students of diverse backgrounds generally do not understand the long-term benefits of doing well in school. The reason is that these benefits often have not been illustrated in the history of their own families. In this situation, students are not likely to comply with teachers' requests because they want to be seen as good students or because they want good grades. Instead, they need specific and immediate reasons -- reasons that make sense to them -- for engaging in academic tasks. Literacy learning in school must be a rewarding experience, in and of itself. D'Amato cites participation in talk story-like reading lessons as an example of a rewarding experience with school literacy for Hawaiian students.

Other experiences many Hawaiian students find particularly rewarding include writing from the heart during the writers' workshop (Calkins, 1994) and engaging in book clubs (Raphael & McMahon, 1994). One potential element of cultural responsiveness during the writers' workshop is topic selection. If teachers model writing from the heart about their own lives, students receive the message that they may do the same. Inevitably, many of the topics they find most meaningful include aspects of Hawaiian culture: attending a baby luau, hunting in the mountains for pigs, preparing for a hula performance. To get their thoughts flowing, students may engage in peer conferences in Hawaii Creole English before they reword their narratives in standard English. They are free to use their home language to generate ideas, although they are expected to write in the standard language. In helping students learn to participate in book clubs, teachers model how they explore connections between the text and their own lives in written responses as well as literature discussions (Au, Carroll, & Scheu, 2001). Students soon begin making connections to their own lives. Also, they can engage in book club discussions using the participation structures they prefer.

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Misconceptions

A common misconception about culturally responsive instruction is that it may have affective but not cognitive benefits. Some people think that the point of this type of instruction is simply to help students feel more comfortable in school. True, students generally do feel more comfortable and confident when participating in culturally responsive lessons. However, the purpose is to promote academic learning and to reach the goal of educational equality. When I compared Hawaiian children's performance in talk story-like lessons to their performance in conventional classroom recitation lessons, I observed major differences. During talk story-like lessons, children spent more time attending to reading, incorporated more text ideas in their statements, and made more logical inferences about the text (Au & Mason, 1981). In this instance, culturally responsive instruction was related to building higher level thinking about text.

The same political climate that has led to mandated programs has fostered a resurgence of an assimilationist point of view. This view hold that considerations of culture are unnecessary, because more students of diverse backgrounds would be successful if schools simply enforced stricter discipline, held higher expectations, and made them try harder. Ironically, although the number of students of diverse backgrounds is steadily rising, educators may be finding less support for efforts that address the cultural and linguistic diversity in schools. An example is the diminishing support for bilingual education. The assimilationist view ignores the value attached to cultural identity by many students of diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, it represents a dangerous oversimplification of the situation faced by many students, for whom school success involves issues much more complex than simply "trying harder." For example, Fordham (1991) has written about the dilemma faced by African American high school students who find that they must "act white" in order to be successful in school. These students find they are forced to choose between fitting in with their peer groups and families and failing in school, or separating themselves and succeeding. Culturally responsive instruction offers students of diverse

backgrounds the possibility of achieving school success without having to confront such a dilemma.

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Sense of Community

Part of culturally responsive instruction involves creating a sense of community in the classroom. In my experience, a sense of community is unmistakable and can be observed as soon as one enters the room. During the writers' workshop, students are writing about a range of topics, and they know what other students are writing about. They show support for others' efforts. They read one another's drafts and published books, they make suggestions during peer conferences, and they clap enthusiastically when a new piece is shared from the author's chair (Graves & Hansen, 1983). Similarly, during the readers' workshop, I see students engaged in partner reading, exchanging opinions about novels during book clubs, and suggesting books that others may enjoy reading.

The sense of community fostered in these classrooms resonates well with the values that many Hawaiian students bring from the home. Many students grow up as part of large, extended families, in which sibling caretaking is the norm (Gallimore, Boggs, & Jordan, 1974). Older children are given the responsibility of caring for their younger brothers and sisters, for example, making sure that they have breakfast, get to school on time, and complete their chores and homework. These experiences prepare children to teach and learn from peers and near-peers. They are taught that everyone in the family must contribute to the good of the extended family, and that these contributions are more important than standing out as an individual. Howard (1974) describes how Hawaiian adults put great stock in social capital, or their relationships with other people, rather than in the economic capital emphasized in western systems. This emphasis on social capital is reflected in Hawaiian children's valuing of social interaction and relationships with others.

In the classroom, then, these children are well prepared to offer assistance to peers and to learn from one another (Jordan, 1985). The successful teacher in classrooms with Hawaiian students creates a community in which literacy learning is fostered through the strengths students bring from the home, including their willingness to engage in peer teaching-learning interactions, to contribute to the good of the group, and to value their relationships with classmates and the teacher.

Teachers who are readers and writers themselves are the force behind these classrooms. They model how they choose topics to write about, and they share their own writing with students. They teach minilessons on skills as well as on the author's craft, and they confer with students individually and in small groups. They establish routines for peer conferences. Through think-alouds, they demonstrate how they interpret ambiguous passages in novels. They take the time to read aloud to students and read along with them during sustained silent reading. They give students opportunities to discuss literature, with adult guidance, on their own, and with peers. They create flexible skill groups to teach struggling readers decoding strategies that others have already learned to apply.

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Culturally Responsive Texts

The earlier sections of this article have focused on the dynamics of culturally responsive instruction. Here I briefly address issues of text and content. Of course, multicultural literature heads the list. An important dimension of these works, in my view, is that authors present an authentic, inside view of the culture (Bishop, 1993). Excellent examples include the books of Yoshiko Uchida, whose fiction explores the experiences of Japanese Americans in the 1930s and 1940s, including their internment in prison camps during World War II. Students who participate in readers' workshops incorporating multicultural literature might have the opportunity to read and respond to works such as Uchida's The Bracelet or Journey to Topaz. If students share the author's cultural identity, they may gain insights about themselves and their families, and discover the value of their own experiences. If students do not share the author's cultural identity, they learn that different cultural groups have histories and experiences that, while unique, offer lessons about life to all readers.

I believe it is important for students of *all* backgrounds to read and respond to works of multicultural literature. However, I feel the interaction with these texts is especially important for students of diverse backgrounds. Given a steady diet of mainstream literature alone, these students are unlikely to understand that their own experiences are worth writing about. In this regard, I believe students of diverse backgrounds benefit in particular from literature by authors whose cultural backgrounds can be recognized as similar to their own. Several researchers working with African American students have shown the powerful responses elicited by literature by African American authors, such as Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (e.g., Lee, 1991). Although students' exposure to multicultural literature certainly should not be limited to works by authors with backgrounds similar to their own, teachers may want to highlight such works because their students are likely to find them especially meaningful and moving. Such texts may serve as excellent examples of how students can explore cultural issues in the pieces they compose during the writers' workshop. In this instance, students themselves are the authors of multicultural texts. The composing and sharing of these texts offer another form of the new, culturally relevant, classroom literacy.

Highlighting multicultural (in contrast to mainstream) literature is one way to begin a shift toward culturally responsive content. For example, Hawaiian students may read and discuss multicultural literature to learn about Polynesian voyaging (e.g., Nunes, 1994), in addition to studying western explorers such as James Cook. These changes in the content of instruction, along with changes in instructional dynamics, contribute to making lessons more meaningful and motivating to students of diverse backgrounds. Concepts that might otherwise have seemed uninteresting can be brought to life, and academic learning can be strengthened.

The preservice teachers with whom I work learn that they can teach many academic concepts through Hawaiian studies units. For example, in science, students can begin by learning about how the ancient Hawaiians named each phase of the moon, and of the significance of these phases in fishing and agriculture. Students gain an understanding of underlying values as well -- in this case, of working cooperatively

and living in harmony with the tempo set by nature. This background is likely to make the topic personally meaningful to students and give them a greater interest in learning about western, scientific explanations for the phases of the moon. The Hawaiian studies content has value in and of itself, while it also serves as a bridge to conventional academic content.

As with changes in participation structures, shifts in content must go beneath the surface to touch upon underlying values. Some values are shown in the case of the unit just described. Examples of other values are presented in Dei's (1994) discussion of Afrocentricity in the education of African American students. Dei highlights the following themes illustrating traditional African values of humanness and harmony with nature: solidarity, mutuality, collective responsibility, sharing of wealth, cooperation, respect for elders, and spirituality.

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Conclusion

For all children, schooling by its very nature involves a break with the family and the familiar. But for children of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, schooling brings an immersion into a world not just unfamiliar but uncomfortable, in which rules governing participation may be in conflict with cultural values. Children from mainstream backgrounds, who in the United States have generally been brought up to value individual achievement, soon adapt to typical procedures for classroom recitation. When the teacher poses a question, the children raise their hands to be called upon. They generally have no trouble speaking up in front of the whole class. In contrast, research shows that Hawaiian children prefer to construct answers with peers, rather than on their own, and to respond cooperatively to the teacher's questions (Boggs, 1972). Similarly, studies show that Native American children prefer not to be have the "teacher spotlight" shine on them but respond willingly when working with groups of peers or during individual conferences with the teacher (Erickson & Mohatt, 1982).

Mainstream schooling often centers on values and procedures that may be incompatible with the values and procedures that students of diverse backgrounds bring from the home and community. It is no wonder that many children of diverse backgrounds lag behind their mainstream peers in terms of academic learning. It often takes these children longer to learn to "do" school, because school is so different from the environments with which they are familiar.

I am sometimes asked if culturally responsive instruction might not handicap students. The argument is that, if students interact in classrooms in culturally responsive ways, they may never learn the conventional structures for interaction expected in school. For example, Hawaiian children might persist in using a talk story style, when conventional classroom recitation -- with only one speaker holding the floor at a time -- is required. The answer to this question becomes clear in the light of observations of teachers successful in bringing Hawaiian students to high levels of literacy. These teachers use culturally responsive instruction as a bridge. In talk story-like reading lessons, for example, there are times when teachers control the

discussion by asking children to raise their hands and wait to be called on before speaking (Au & Mason, 1983). Teachers signal to students when it is appropriate to speak in a talk story style and when it is appropriate to follow the rules for conventional classroom recitation. This mix of participation structures, some typical of the home and community and some typical of school, creates the bridge to school success. Instruction does not ever replicate the home environment, but draws upon elements of it to encourage students' engagement and participation. Students experience success in lessons and develop academic strengths, and these strides forward may contribute to continued progress.

I have found culturally responsive instruction to be an effective and appropriate means to the end of bringing students of diverse backgrounds to high levels of literacy. Such instruction allows educators to engage students in literacy experiences they find meaningful and motivating. Thus, culturally responsive instruction has the advantage of making literacy learning immediately rewarding to students of diverse backgrounds. Culturally responsive instruction leads to new literacies in classrooms, literacies promoting higher level thinking about text by building upon cultural knowledge.

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