

TOWARDS DEFINING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS: A CROSS-CULTURAL VIEW OF COLLABORATION¹

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Introduction

The fundamental goal of education is commonly defined as the successful socialization of an individual to participate in mainstream society. As socializing agents, teachers often see their task as the shaping and molding of children to participate successfully in the dominant culture or the teaching of acceptable ways of speaking and acting, rather than the bridging of differences that may exist between the home environment and mainstream society. One result of this pedagogy has been a high rate of failure among many minority (non-immigrant minority, cf. Ogbu 1987) populations. These hegemonic practices which are reflected in the society at large and classrooms in particular (Erickson 1987) need to be questioned. One response to this situation has been a call for culturally congruent classrooms (e.g. Philips 1972, 1982; Au and Jordon 1981; Au and Mason 1981; Heath 1983; cf. Erickson 1987 for a critique of this position). Bernstein (1972: 149) explains that teachers must first participate in the students' communities before they can expect the students to participate in the teachers' communities. He writes, "If the culture of the teacher is to become part of the consciousness of the child, then the culture of the child must first be in the consciousness of the teacher". Recognition of cultural differences and their integration into both the content and social context or interactions of a classroom may result in a redefinition of what it means to become literate, to adapt successfully to the demands of the mainstream society (DeStefano, Pepinsky and Sanders 1982).

This paper begins with the proposition that learning is essentially a social activity and that social ways of acting or culture are learned in the classroom. This definition of learning as involving social transactions leads to the second section of the paper, which is an exploration of collaborative learning between teachers and students and among students as peers. This discussion draws on cross-cultural research and sociolinguistic studies to emphasize the value and importance of collaborative learning, particularly for minority populations. The final section of this paper will examine and develop the concept of communities of learners and will end with the question of how successful teachers and students establish communities of learners in a multicultural classroom.

1: Learning is a social process

Through the work of Vygotsky (1978) and others we have come to question the view of learning as the transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the student. Rather it can be conceptualized as a complex process which is mediated through interaction and interpretation (Michaels and Cazden 1986). In her study of the acquisition of formal and informal literary processes by children in a nursery school, Cochran-Smith (1984: 99) was able to identify and document the ways in which learning is a result of socialization. She writes that "learning about reading and writing was the result of a gradual process of socialization that was indirect, informal and embedded in the routine social interactions of adults and children".

A study of the decision-making processes which are involved in supermarket arithmetic (Lave, Murtaugh and de la Rocha 1984) demonstrated that people made significantly fewer errors when they engaged in comparison shopping at a store than when they were given similar problems in a test-like situation that resembles a typical classroom lesson. In fact their performance at the store was virtually error-free. The crucial difference between these two environments is that shoppers defined their own problems, whereas in the test

situation, the parameters of the problem are established by the tester. These problems are not simply out of context, rather they are in a context in which the problem-solver has no control over their definition. Lave et al conclude:

Procedures for solving problems are dialectically constituted, in the sense that setting and activity mutually create and change each other; in the process, "problems" are generated and resolved. These characteristics emerged from analysis of arena, setting, and activity. Had the template instead been the school ideology concerning linear algorithms for problem solving, analyzing the arithmetic practices would have been impossible. This demonstrates the value of analyzing both the context of activity and the activity in context (93).

The social context of learning operates at two levels. First, through interaction with others and second, through the physical objects, symbols and practices which are embedded in a sociocultural history (Vygotzky 1978; Rogoff 1984; Erickson 1984). This notion of learning as a dialectical process which is socially constituted challenges the common assumption that a person's ability is context independent and located inside of that individual alone (Erickson 1984) and has implications for classroom practice.

In their review of the sociolinguistic studies of reading, Bloome and Green (1984: 395) describe reading (and I would add writing) as a fundamentally social process. They write:

As a social process, reading is used to establish, structure, and maintain social relationships between and among people. As a linguistic process, reading is used to communicate intention and meanings, not only between an author and a reader, but also between people involved in a reading event.

Thus reading and writing are fundamentally meaning-making processes that both establish a social context, while simultaneously the social context influences the making of meaning. Mishler (1979: 13) articulated the relationship succinctly: "...meaning and context are produced simultaneously by the actors in and through their interaction". Similarly, Geertz (1973) defines culture as webs of meaning and interpretations that are created and recreated through what people do with each other and through the interpretative meanings that are created and

shared through these interactions. In this light, reading and writing, indeed learning, can be viewed as not only social but also cultural phenomena (Bloome and Greene 1984).

Vygotsky (1978: 38) describes the interpersonal or social and the intrapersonal or psychological components of learning:

Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category and then within the individual child as an intrapsychological category. This is equally true with regard to voluntary attention, logical memory, the formation of concepts and the development of volition.

Returning to reading and writing as examples of learning, the intrapersonal context can be defined as the background knowledge, skills and general approaches that the individual brings to the text. The interpersonal context is comprised of the organization of the reading and writing events and the interactions of the participants in these events. This includes the influence that the interactions have on the reading and writing processes, as well as the ways in which these processes affect the social interactions of the participants (Bloome and Green 1984). Harste, Burke and Woodward (1982: 108) combine these concepts in their sociopsycholinguistic model of reading:

In considering a given text, the *language setting* (emphasis in the original) which includes where the language is found (home, school, store), in what culture (United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia), and for and by whom it was produced (peer, superior, subordinate) modifies the *mental setting* in terms of what schemas the reader accesses. The accessed schemata direct strategy utilization and, hence, sampling of language setting.

It is important to emphasize that the intrapersonal context or "mental setting" is not independent of social interactions but a result of information that is learned through transactions with the environment. Bloome (1987: 126) describes reading as a process that is simultaneously socialization, enculturation and cognition. In other words, reading includes the learning of culturally bound ways of thinking which is both a consequence of and an influence of the "socialization of

interpersonal relationships". Bloome emphasized that his term "sociocognitive" refers to simultaneous processes that are both social and cognitive.

An example of this type of relationship is the concept of scaffolding (cf. Wood, Bruner and Ross 1976; Erickson 1984) which is a jointly constructed relationship between a teacher and a learner that matches the requirements of both the learner and the task. In this relationship the learner has the right to ask for help (social interaction) and to redefine the task (social context). Erickson (1984: 333-334) writes that this differs from the traditional relationship between teacher and student in which the teacher often makes a one-sided attempt to construct a scaffold. He points to standardized tests as an extreme example of a school learning environment in which neither the student or the teacher is able to shape the learning task. "The test as a social situation has removed the teacher's right to scaffold - to teach." This indictment is particularly poignant in light of the centrality of tests in the lives of most students.

At the same time that learning is a social and cultural process, culture is learned in schools. Goodenough (1963: 259, in Erickson 1986) defines culture as the learned and shared standards for perceiving, believing, judging and acting on the actions of others. Using this definition, Erickson (1986) defines teaching as cross-cultural communication because the teacher uses learned ways of thinking, acting and feeling that must be mastered by the student. He concludes that it is the teacher's responsibility to act as bridge or mediator on behalf of all students regardless of the multicultural composition of a given classroom. In the next section of this paper, the value of collaboration as a way to mediate the interactions of learners and teachers and among learners as peers from a variety of cultures will be examined.

||: Collaboration as a model

Collaboration has two meanings: to work jointly with others and to cooperate with the enemy. This duality, embodied in the meaning of the word, reflects the tension around collaboration in most traditional mainstream classrooms. On one hand, learning is a social process that is mediated primarily through interactions between teachers and students, and through students' interactions with each other. On the other hand, when students consult with each other and share knowledge, their behavior is generally referred to as cheating. In addition, students are evaluated individually with tests that usually are based on single correct answers, drawn from the generally culturally bound knowledge of the teacher or the text.

This section of the paper will draw primarily on sociolinguistic research which suggests the implications that collaborative learning might have for the education of minority students. Collaboration will be examined in terms of both form and content (Mehan 1979; Erickson 1982a, 1982b). In other words, collaboration will be discussed both in terms of social participation structures and academic task structures (Erickson 1982a) or the collaborative making of meaning.

Kathryn Au and her colleagues (cf. Au and Mason 1981; Au and Jordan 1981) have challenged the assumption that the poor achievement of minority students (in this case, Hawaiian students) is due to a skill or knowledge deficit. Instead, they argue that the social organization of traditional classrooms is responsible for this failure to achieve. In controlled experiments, Au and Mason (1981) examined the relationships between learning to read and different social interactions or "participation structures" (Philips 1972; Erickson and Schultz 1981; Erickson and Mohatt 1982). In one classroom, the participation structure of the reading group was similar to mainstream classrooms. In this classroom, the students waited to be called on and spoke one at a time. In the second classroom, the students were

allowed to collaborate or take turns in "joint performance" so that their answers were overlapping and built on one another. Their interaction can be characterized as one of close cooperation and synchronization of speech (Au and Jordan 1981). This style is similar to the "talk story" which is a common family and community event for these Hawaiian children. In the lessons that were organized like the talk story and which encouraged collaboration, the students were more enthusiastic and participated more frequently in the discussions. In addition, their performance on the reading tests that were administered immediately after the lessons, was significantly higher than their classmates' who participated in the traditional reading group format.

Au and Mason (1981: 115) developed the construct of a "balance of rights" to describe the relationship between the classroom social structure and student success. A balance of rights includes three dimensions: the teacher allows more than one child to speak at a time; the teacher sanctions student selection of topics rather than insisting that they only speak about the topic that she chooses; and the teacher allows the children to speak at the times they choose rather than dictating when they are allowed to speak. Au and Mason (1981) write that there is a balance of rights if these three dimensions are cooperatively controlled by the students and the teacher. In this particular instance, the children were allowed to control both their role and timing as speakers, while the teacher retained control over the topic of the discussion. While the focus of this study is on social participation in reading groups, the authors (Au and Jordan 1981) report that learners' interactions with their peer groups at the learning centers was a significant factor in the students' success. The collaborative production of discourse described in the Hawaiian studies is similar to the Afro-American call and response patterns (cf. Erickson 1982). Erickson (1984: 87-88) documents the ways in which the call and response between the speaker and the audience lead to a "collaborative production" of discourse (which is a manifestation of the social relationship of solidarity between

the speaker and his or her partners in the audience". Both blues singers and preachers make the collaboration between their audience and themselves explicit. For instance, both a blues singer and a preacher might ask 'Will somebody help me?' at the end of a phrase, which would elicit a response from the audience (Erickson 1984a). Erickson concludes after an analysis of a lengthy transcript of a discussion among black teenagers, that while the conversation might appear to be difficult to follow when judged by mainstream discourse conventions because it doesn't follow a literate style linear sequence, it is logical and can be characterized by the audience/speaker interaction.

Michaels and her colleagues (cf. Michaels and Cazden 1986; Michaels 1981) studied the instances in which collaboration occurs during "sharing time" (show and tell) in the early grades inner city classroom. Collaboration in this study is defined as the "connected stretches of discourse, in which jointly, teacher and child develop an elaborated set of ideas on a particular topic..." (Michaels and Cazden 1986: 133). They characterize collaboration by the following pattern - a child says something (generally in response to a teacher's question), the child is questioned and she or he responds with new information that is an elaboration. This is a very specific form of collaboration that differs in its participation structure from the Black American discourse patterns discussed above. Michaels and Cazden suggest that one reason for the disproportionately poor achievement of minority students is that they do not participate equally in the collaborative classroom activities like sharing time in which basic literacy skills are learned and practiced. In these studies, Michaels and her colleagues found that teachers collaborated more successfully with some children than others. The degree to which the teacher and learner shared discourse conventions and strategies that are representative of mainstream culture determined the success in their collaboration. In sum, we can speculate that collaborative discourse strategies and conventions that are described in Erickson's (1984a) study prevent effective teacher-student collaboration in the

classrooms that Michaels studied. The denial of opportunities for children to participate in key learning activities raises profound issues of equity in education.

In his study of the social organization of an elementary classroom in an urban neighborhood, Mehan (1979) found that successful interactions occurred when teachers and students synchronized their gestures and speech with each other. Specifically, he described the ways in which students learned to insert talk at appropriate junctures, choose topics that were relevant to the previous discussion and make contributions in order to initiate talk during lessons or to keep the floor. As a result of his study, he advocates a "pluralistic" approach which would reflect a flexibility of classroom organization and would include multiple ways of speaking and acting rather than insisting that learners conform to standard forms of discourse.

The examination of collaborative learning has important implications for the distribution of power and authority in the classroom. In a traditional classroom, the teacher maintains the position of authority in controlling both the discourse style and access to participation in the discourse as discussed above. Mehan (1979) describes the conventional sequence of a discussion in a classroom as a two or three part sequence: the teacher asks a question, the student replies and the teacher evaluates the student's response. A number of studies of Native American classrooms (cf. Philips 1972, 1983; Erickson and Mohatt 1982; Barnhardt 1982) provide evidence that the cultural assumptions about authority that are inherent in these classroom participation structures differ from those found in the communities of Native American children.

Susan Philips (1972, 1983) studied the participation structures in the schools, homes and community-wide social activities of the Warm Springs Indians to discover the cultural contexts and social conditions that define when a person uses speech. In a typical classroom, she discovered that the teachers control who will talk and when they will speak. At home, most talk is done in conjunction with

physical activity, usually work. Talk is then interspersed with work, which in turn shapes the interaction. Phillips found that at community events, talk was evenly distributed with almost no interruptions. Several people seemed to direct the meetings, which reflects the values of not placing oneself above others and of directing attention to oneself or to other individuals. She found that both individual autonomy and collective group responsibility are fostered in this culture, in ways that encourage self-control rather than control over others.

Phillips discovered through her observations of classrooms and community events that Native American students were required to act in ways that ran counter to the behavioral expectations in their community, in order to participate in mainstream classrooms. For instance, in these classrooms they would have to appeal to a single individual (the teacher) for a turn to speak, they would have to speak in a given time period and that same individual (the teacher) rather than the whole group would function as their audience. These children were not used to a single adult authority. This situation is further complicated by the fact that the teacher was not a member of their community, but an outsider. This same pattern was reflected in the children's play. The Native American children would often choose to play team games. They were reluctant to play games such as follow-the-leader, in which one person would have to enact a role that involved controlling the activities of others. Additionally, they were able to sustain games for long periods of time (relative to their Anglo peers) without adult supervision.

The participation of Native American students in discussions decreased as they advanced through school. This reluctance to speak was particularly evident when the teacher tightly controlled opportunities for response. In contrast, the students willingly participated in activities that were focussed on group rather than individual performance. In other words, they talked more when they retained the authority to decide when to speak and in group activities that do not create the uncomfortable distinction between the individual performer and the audience.

Phillips (1972) concludes that in multicultural classrooms, teachers should teach in a manner that allows for complementary diversity in communication styles and participation structures through which learning and the measurement of learning are enacted. Au and Mason (1981) reached a similar conclusion from their study of Hawaiian children. They wrote that culturally congruent classrooms may prevent damaging conflicts between teachers and students.

The shift in the power structure in classrooms which allows for collaborative learning as a style that is culturally congruent with the learners' home and community styles may decrease the phenomenon of resistance among minority students. If students are given opportunities to learn by working together, they no longer need to choose between holding on to the style of their family and their peers, and the mainstream classroom style. Two studies in Native American communities document successful ways of teaching that have been used by Native American teachers. Erickson and Mohatt (1982) compared the organization of social relationships and teaching behaviors of a native Odawa Indian teacher to an Anglo teacher in a comparable classroom of Native American students in Northern Ontario. They were especially interested in how the two teachers exercised their authority. Carol Barnhardt (1982) looked at three classrooms in Alaska that have Athabaskan students and teachers to document how these teachers and students were successful in their work together.

Erickson and Homatt (1982: 143) found that in the classroom taught by the native teacher, there was a sense of pacing which indicated "shared expectations and interpretive strategies on the part of the participants on the interactional scene". The teaching behavior of the Odawa Indian teacher appeared to be culturally shaped in terms of tempo, for instance the speed of teacher-student interaction, and in terms of directiveness, including the amount and types of control used by the teacher. For example, when she started group work, the native teacher moved through the room more slowly than her Anglo counterpart and

talked with large groups rather than individual children. Talk with individuals was private and performed at a close distance as compared with the Anglo teacher who frequently called across the room. Within the constraints of a standard curriculum and traditional teaching methods, the Native American teacher intuitively found ways to accommodate the Odawa principles of etiquette. In fact throughout the year, the non-native teacher adapted his teaching style in the direction of greater congruence with the community participation structures. We can speculate that these small changes in the social relations and participation structures of classrooms may make significant differences in the ways that children engage in the school curriculum and thus have a profound effect on their achievement.

In her study of Athabaskan classrooms in Alaska, Barnhardt (1982) also found that the native teachers adjusted their tempos to the verbal and non-verbal timing established by the students. The teachers in these classrooms did not dominate with their talk or physical presence. Barnhardt drew a comparison between the teaching styles of the Athabaskan teachers and jazz band conductors. The role of both the teacher in these classrooms and of jazz band conductors is to initiate the action or help get the group started and then become part of the group, providing direction and support when requested with a minimal amount of interference. Like the jazz band conductors, Athabaskan teachers did not feel obliged to continually perform for their students or to visibly exercise their power and authority.

Ronald and Suzanne Scollon (1981) found that in the Koyukon Athabaskan villages they studied, students are often caught in a bind. Many members of this community, including some of their parents, are non-literate. Thus "to learn to read and write fluently would seem metaphorically to be leaving the community and to be no longer Koyukon" (Erickson, 1987: 25). This represents a special form of resistance and one that will not disappear if schools become more culturally sensitive. In this case and others, changes need to take place in the society as a