Funds of Knowledge at Work in the Writing Classroom

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Critical theorists have long been united in their quest to empower the disenfranchised and to deconstruct injustices and inequalities (Freire, 1981; McLaren, 1994). Schools, in particular, seem to serve certain groups of people over others. Schools become "sorting mechanisms in which select groups of students are favored on the basis of race, class, and gender" (McLaren, 1994, p. 168).

Students within the dominant culture know how to speak, act, dress, and think in ways that move them ahead in society. These students gain such cultural capital (Apple, 1979), while students outside the dominant culture are often left without the means to gain entry into the culture of power (Delpit, 1995).

Such is the situation for culturally diverse students in the United States. Studies have shown that, in many classrooms in the United States, culturally diverse children's knowledge and the ways of learning they bring from home often conflict with the teaching practices and curricula of school (Au, 1993; Heath, 1983). In particular, Latino children often experience cultural conflict within the United States education system (Velez-Ibanez, 1996).

Because of these clashing ways of teaching and learning between home and school, families of these children often feel alienated from the schools (Delgado-Gaitan, 1993).

Moreover, schools often "facilitate the exclusion of students and parents by establishing activities that require specific majority culturally based knowledge and behaviors about the school as an institution" (Delgado-Gaitan, 1993, p. 21). Too often, teachers disregard the inherent knowledge that students bring with them to the classroom. In particular, the knowledge and cultural resources of diverse students are often overlooked or seen as "baggage" rather than as assets.

Teachers must become aware of such inequities, but once such an awareness develops, how do teachers begin to break down barriers between home and school? This article addresses this crucial question.

The Funds of Knowledge for Teaching Project

Although teachers have often entered their students' homes in order to give progress reports, report inappropriate behavior, and "teach" the families what they "need to know," few have ever stepped into the homes of families to gain understandings of what the families know. Such is the case with The Funds of Knowledge for Teaching Project.

Following Velez-Ibanez and Greenberg's research (1992), Luis Moll and his colleagues (1994) began studying the literacy practices of U.S. Mexican households. After a few years of working with anthropologists and sharing the project's findings with educators, Moll invited teachers to become involved as teacher-researchers in the households of some of their students. The premise of the project is that "Classroom learning can be greatly enhanced when teachers learn more not just about their students' culture in an abstract sense but about *their particular* students (emphasis in the original) and their students' households" (Gonzalez, 1995, p. 3).

Thus began The Funds of Knowledge for Teaching Project. In partnership with Moll and his colleagues, teachers began visiting the homes of some of their students. Their goals were to establish relationships with the families and to learn about the different ways the families shared knowledge with one another.

Along with these home visits, groups of teachers and university researchers met after school to discuss their field notes, reflective journals, uncertainties, challenges, and developing ideas for weaving the families' knowledge into the classroom curricula (Gonzalez et. al., 1995).

Many of the teacher-researchers have begun to write about their experiences in The Funds of Knowledge Project. For example, Marla Hensley, a kindergarten teacher, shares how she learned that a father of one of her students, Mr. Jarman, was a musician. After visiting his home and noticing a guitar leaning against the closet, she asked him if he would like to share his music in the classroom. One visit became two, and two became three, and by the end of the school year, Mr. Jarman had written and directed a musical for the kindergarten.

Not only did Marla's students benefit from Mr. Jarman's knowledge, but she transcended the typical teacher-parent relationship. As she explains, "A friend-to-friend interchange and sense of common purpose are fostered" (Hensley, 1995, p. 16) in home-school relationships such as these.

Other teachers have shared stories from The Funds of Knowledge Project. One writes of how he involved his fifth graders as ethnographers in the classroom (Craig, 1994); a special education teacher made a major breakthrough with a hard-to-reach student through this project (Gittings, 1995). Still others discuss the metamorphosis of becoming teacher-researchers, learning about anthropological inquiry as "more of a state of mind than a technique" (Gonzalez et. al., 1995, p. 453).

Deepening relationships between teachers and students' families seem to lie at the heart of The Funds of Knowledge for Teaching Project. As Norma Gonzalez (1995) explained, "The point *of* this type *of* ethnography must be not the collection *of* data but the development *of* relationships

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of empowerment and access between communities and schools" (p. 6). Parents and students who see themselves in the role of teachers, as well as the teacher who finds herself stepping into the learner's place, certainly break down barriers that all too often leave families and schools feeling distant and disconnected.

By listening to the families' stories, spending extra time with the families, and recognizing and incorporating students' home knowledge into the school curriculum, teachers and families may, indeed, gain a beginning sense of *confianza*—mutual trust—with one another. This is a crucial point, since, as Margaret M. Voss (1993) explains, "The more we can learn from children's families, the more we can take advantage of the tremendous variety—and wealth—that family cultures contribute to our children" (p. 640).

As a former secondary teacher of urban adolescents, I remember the kinds of time demands I felt and how often I left school feeling completely over-burdened. Planning, attending meetings, worrying about students, participating in workshops, creating teaching materials. The list of things to do seemed endless, and to visit students' families on top of everything else would have been unthinkable.

However, I was greatly impressed with the teachers I encountered through researching The Funds of Knowledge for Teaching Project. They certainly shared many of the burdens I did as a teacher, yet they headed out into the neighborhoods after school to spend time with their students' families. "How did they do it?", I asked.

These teachers visited and revisited these homes because they wanted to gain a sense of the knowledge their students' families shared. And, in doing so, they got to know the families in a deeper and more personal way than is possible within the confines of a traditional classroom. But how could I—as a secondary teacher with 175 students—get a more detailed picture of the lives of my students outside of school?

Using Writing as a Window into our Students' Funds of Knowledge

It is an admirable goal for teachers to get to know their students on a personal basis, encouraging them to tap into family, community, and/or cultural resources. But especially for secondary teachers, who may have responsibility for over 150 students, this is difficult to do. As a practical reality, it is not likely that secondary teachers will have the opportunity to conduct home visits for more than a handful of their students. However, by asking students to write about their household funds of knowledge "teachers [can] academically validate the background knowledge with which students come equipped" (Gonzalez, 1995, p. 5).

Since my research into writing attitudes supports the idea that many students are disinterested in writing about topics that are of no personal interest to them (Mayher, 1990; Street, 2002, 2003), perhaps the development of greater understanding of the "funds of knowledge" that our students bring to the writing classroom can be tapped and focused as pedagogical tools of inquiry. Using writing as a window into our students' hidden areas of expertise and funds of knowledge may be a practical way to learn more about what our students know and who they consult for help with academic tasks.

This point was noted by Norma Gonzalez (1995), who suggests that classroom learning can be enhanced when teachers learn more about their particular students and their lives outside of school. In writing about personal experiences, their interests, and their lives, students may help inform their teachers of their particular life situations and interests while at the same time making substantial literacy gains. This work is beginning to occur with students at both the elementary and secondary levels (Amanti, 1995; Fisher & Frey, 2003; Gonzalez, 1995; Stock, 1995).

Tapping the hidden funds of knowledge of culturally diverse students is especially significant since many of these students tend to isolate themselves for what they perceive as failure with writing. These reluctant writers certainly do not see themselves belonging to a community of writers. These strong doubts about writing abilities are nowhere more apparent than in a classroom full of culturally diverse students.

However, changes in attitude are possible. For these students in particular, improving attitudes toward writing is often the first step to success. Certainly many teachers of writing are aware of their students' fear and/or distaste for writing. Once teachers are aware of their students' attitudes toward writing, the question of how to overcome those negative perceptions emerges.

Peter Elbow (1990) has made the sensible claim that in order to enhance learning teachers need to get more authority in the student. Additionally, there are certainly many writing teachers (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1986; Rief 1992; Romano, 1987) and researchers (Labbo, Hoffman, & Roser, 1985; Rico, 1983) who have demonstrated that students have individual voices and important things to communicate.

It was my goal to find the voices of my students and see what was important to them. By allowing my students to choose their writing topics I hoped they would pursue their writing assignments with improved interest and energy. As I asked my students to take a more active role in their development as writers, I was curious to see whether they really would "come to see themselves as participants in, rather than observers of, the construction of knowledge" (Penrose & Geisler, 1994, p. 517).

My Solution: The Funds of Knowledge Writing Project

Simply offering my students the chance to choose their own writing topics allowed me to weave my students' experience into my educational practice. In order to learn more about my students, their lives, their cultural resources, and their families, my new writing curriculum was based solely around their areas of expertise, their funds of knowledge. I called this approach the Funds of Knowledge Writing Project.

As I began to tap my students' funds of knowledge, writing topics emerged quite naturally from the stories and experiences they shared with me. Because my students were asked to write about topics of interest to them, there was an immediate sense of acceptance. It was only by allowing students to write about topics of their own choosing that I gained access to their hidden areas of expertise. As I provided them with supportive feedback on their writing, we slowly began to establish a sense of mutual trust.

Another benefit to this approach was that as I began allowing my students to write about self-chosen topics, the dynamics in my classroom became much more fluid and democratic. I was now able to move about the room, assisting students as they composed at their own pace and on topics of their choosing. Freed from my white board and podium, I roamed freely, assisting students on an individual basis and listening to their stories. These shifting dynamics made all the difference for me, and for my students.

I began to listen more and talk less, asking students what they knew and cared about. I allowed my middle school students to dictate the lessons to be learned. They became my teachers, allowing me a unique glimpse into their lives outside of school. In doing so, I found myself learning many important lessons about the cultural and familial resources of my students.

For example, through her writing, Juanita, a formerly recalcitrant middle schooler, opened up and poured out her fears regarding being the first person in her family with plans to attend college. Jesus, whose tough persona never hinted at his intellectual interests, taught me things I never knew about his family's prominent role in the Guatemalan government. But of all the stories I read, none was more memorable than Norma's.

Through Norma's essays, I learned about her family life and how the Funds of Knowledge Writing Project had impacted her life outside of school. Norma wrote extensively about the decrepit and dangerous elevators at her apartment complex, an issue that had remained unresolved after two years of protests by the residents. I encouraged Norma to initiate a letter writing campaign to prompt the management company of the complex to take action. She and her family, after writing their own letters and offering them as models for their neighbors, encouraged other families within the apartment complex to write letters.

After her three week campaign, Norma had initiated a movement that resulted in over 40 letters from residents. Shortly thereafter, repairs began at Norma's apartment complex, thus greatly easing the ability of the tenants to safely move among the 12 floors of the aging complex. Norma came to discover her own literate potential through this writing project. And her family and friends were the direct beneficiaries of her school-based project.

Beyond the curricular benefits of this writing project, deepening relationships with students' families proved to be an unexpected outgrowth of the project. By listening to the stories of my students and their families and recognizing and incorporating knowledge from my students' home lives, new patterns of dialogue emerged. As the semester went on, families of other students heard about the success of Norma's letter writing campaign.

They began to approach me regarding ways they could to use the school work of their children to enact positive changes in their own lives. These changing dynamics certainly helped to break down barriers that had previously left many of the families I served feeling distant and disconnected from the school. My students and their parents were beginning to see themselves in the role of teacher while I gladly stepped into the learner's place. Though these experiences occurred close to ten years ago, I am still taken aback at how significant an impact they had upon my life as a teacher.

My experiences with the Funds of Knowledge Writing Project changed and broadened my orientation as both a teacher of writing and as a researcher interested in studying the relationship between writing and culture. Moreover, by changing my pedagogical approach to the teaching of writing, I established relationships in which every participant in the class was both teacher and learner.

Instead of approaching the family as the *Expert*, I read about my students' family lives as a learner. Most often, I left the experience with a richer knowledge of how I might learn to better incorporate the knowledge of my students and their families in the classroom. Each time I commented on a piece of student writing or welcomed a parent with questions about the Funds of Knowledge Project, I felt as if I was engaged in culturally relevant teaching.

Elbow's claim that "To enhance good learning, we need to get more authority in the student" (1990, p. 184) now seems an even more credible statement. Indeed, in helping students "come to see themselves as participants in, rather than observers of, the construction of knowledge" (Penrose and Geisler, 1994, p. 517), I have reassessed some of my previously unexplored assumptions regarding what it means to teach well, and to have students truly learn.

My students confirmed for me that Moll and Gonzalez (1994) were correct: "Becoming literate means taking full advantage of social and cultural resources in the service of academic goals" (p. 441). By developing teaching strategies that took into account the knowledge my students were bringing to school I became a better teacher, and my students became more engaged learners.

From my students I learned about their families, what was important to them, what they knew, and what contributed to their success as students. Without the window of writing, my students and I would never have had the opportunity to learn these valuable lessons, all of which improved my ability to teach and their ability to learn.

Furthermore, I never would have had the opportunity to learn from and connect with my students' families. Thus, tapping our students' funds of knowledge may serve as an important educational tool that moves us toward the ideal of better connecting with the lived experiences of our students—and their families.

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