Building a Culture of Collaboration through

Hybrid Language Practices

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Traditional understandings of group work or co-participation in learning activities have focused on the individual, on what individuals do in a group, and on coordinating individuals' actions to accomplish a task (Chiu, 1996). Learning from this perspective is organized at the individual or group level, without explicit focus on how the larger learning context influences and organizes learning in the cooperative learning activity. We make a distinction between commonplace notions of cooperative and collaborative learning and, instead, utilize the concept of *joint activity* to describe particular processes of co-participation and co-learning. In this article, we present a view of collaborative learning that is grounded in a sociocultural view of learning and development (Gutiérrez & Stone, 1997).

A sociocultural view of learning reconceptualizes the nature and purpose of cooperation and collaboration. The process of coordinating actions with others, or joint activity, is a socially mediated process that can be understood not only in terms of the more expert learner assisting the less capable one, but in terms of how human beings utilize social processes and a variety of cultural resources to construct potential zones of proximal development (Moll, in press; Scribner, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978) also known as Zo-peds (Griffin & Cole, 1984).[i] Collaboration here is understood as a process in which participants acquire knowledge through co-participating, co-cognizing, and co-problem-solving within linguistically, culturally, and academically heterogeneous groups throughout the course of task completion. The goal is learning and joint activity facilitates or mediates learning for the participants. Too often the distribution of roles and sub-tasks in more traditional forms of cooperative learning become the

focus and, thus, preclude the ongoing joint activity needed for the moment-to-moment sharing of linguistic, sociocultural, and cognitive resources.

Accordingly, we argue that for collaboration to serve as a resource for learning in moment-to-moment interaction among students in dyads or other group configurations, collaboration must be central characteristic of the larger activity system, i.e., the classroom or learning context. In other words, joint activity must be an ongoing feature of the normative practices of formal and non-formal learning contexts in order that productive collaboration can occur in dyads and groups. When collaboration is a commonplace strategy, students begin to see co-learning as the routine way of participating and thinking in everyday learning activities. In other words, there is a relationship between what is learned and the social contexts of development (Gutiérrez, 1992; 1993; 1995; Gutiérrez & Larson, 1994; Gutiérrez & Meyer, 1995). The important point here is that individual learning cannot be separated from the ways the larger learning context is organized. The goal, then, is to create rich zones of development in which all participants learn by jointly participating in activities in which they share material, sociocultural, linguistic, and cognitive resources.

We present a case study of one group of participants in a highly productive non-formal learning environment that exemplifies the practices of a collaborative community. Although we focus on one example of joint activity observed over time, our data illustrate our case across many contexts and learning tasks. Central to an understanding of this culture of collaboration is the notion of hybridity. We illustrate how hybridity is a resource for building collaboration and promoting literacy learning. From this perspective, language is a central mediating tool in fostering productive joint activity, its goals, and its learning outcomes.

Language and Literacy as Mediating Tools

Language and literacy are inseparable parts of the sociocultural context of development. In this way, literacy development should not only be a learning goal, but also it should be a central means of sharing and appropriating knowledge. From this sociocultural perspective, collaborating individuals can use their literacy skills, including language, to clarify their own emergent understandings of the task and its goals, to share knowledge, to assist one another, and shift roles in the learning process. To illustrate these principles, we include the following example of a productive joint activity in a collaborative community.

The Case

For the past two years, children and university undergraduates have participated in educational activities organized around several dimensions of play in a lively after-school computer club. This after-school club, *Las Redes* (Networks), is simultaneously a playful world and a collaborative culture that brings play and learning together. *Las Redes*, located at a port-of-entry urban elementary school near Los Angeles International airport, is a flexible adaptation of the general principles around which Michael Cole conceptualized the Fifth Dimension after-school projects (Cole, 1996; Griffin & Cole, 1984).[ii]

Las Redes is a conscious effort to promote cognitive and social development and foster collaboration among a cross-generational and diverse group of participants (Cole, 1996). The children at *Las Redes* reflect the population of the elementary school, comprised mainly of Latinos, African-American, and Tongan students. The undergraduate students known as *amigas* and *amigos*, represent a balance of Euro-American, Asian American, Latino, and

African-American students from a variety of academic disciplines. In the playful environment of computer mediated learning at *Las Redes*, participants draw from their own as well as each other's linguistic and sociocultural resources to collaborate in problem-solving activities, creating rich zones of development. These diverse and hybrid repertoires and practices, as we will illustrate, become the tools for mediating literacy learning.

While hybridity in learning contexts is ubiquitous, few scholars and practitioners consciously discuss or use it as a resource for enhancing joint activity and productive learning (Gutiérrez, Rymes, Larson, 1995). For us, hybrid literacy practices are not simply code-switching as the alternation between two language codes. They are more a systematic, strategic, affiliative, and sense-making process among those who share the code, as they strive to achieve mutual understanding. *Las Redes* is a system of activities that fosters and utilizes hybridity as integral to the social organization of learning. Of importance is that learning in this context requires participants to negotiate their roles and understandings as they co-participate in various problem-solving activities. Thus, *Las Redes* is a larger activity system that uses hybridity strategically in the way its roles, tasks, and material and human resources are conceptualized and then used locally (Baquedano-López, Alvarez, & Gutiérrez, 1998; Engeström, 1987; 1993; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Alvarez, 1998; Gutiérrez & Stone, 1997; Stone & Gutiérrez, 1998). We illustrate the ways hybridity is central to creating and maintaining this culture of collaboration and how it serves as a resource for learning for all participants in the after-school learning context.

Hybrid Literacy Practices

There are many literacy activities at *Las Redes*. We focus on one particularly rich literacy activity, a multi-purposed writing activity that utilizes mixed-genres, i.e., letters and narratives, and mixed discourses, including problem-solving, narrative, and academic discourse. Further, because no one single language or register is privileged in this activity and setting, the larger linguistic repertoires of participants become tools for meaning-making. Such language practices certainly challenge current English-only policies that privilege one particular language and minimize learning. In a Bakhtinian (1981) sense, hybridity increases the possibility of dialogue— and, thus, the possibility of collaborating and learning. We have referred to these productive spaces for learning as the third space (Gutiérrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Turner, 1997).

One principle for organizing development at *Las Redes* is the mixture of play and learning. The productive tension between play and learning creates zones of development otherwise not evident in traditional classrooms. In sociocultural theory, play provides the environment for natural learning to occur. Moreover, in these learning activities, students' participation is based on authentic competence, rather than on traditional school criteria such as age, language background, education, or ability (Cole, Olt, & Woodbridge, 1994). Thus, participants often draw freely on their linguistic and sociocultural repertoires to solve a variety of problems together.

To sustain the playful, collaborative, and learning character and goals of this setting, an ambiguous entity called "El Maga" resides in cyberspace and is accessible through electronic

mail. Even Maga's name, the deliberate combination of the masculine article with a feminine noun in Spanish, symbolizes its hybrid identity. Of significance is how El Maga helps sustain the culture of collaboration and promotes meaningful participation, socialization to the culture of the setting, and affiliation among participants through ongoing and highly personalized dialogue. Thus, the larger culture of collaboration is continually reconstituted by an ever-present group comprised of the children, the undergraduates, and El Maga.

El Maga, utilizing personal knowledge of the children's everyday practices in the after-school club and the children's linguistic and cultural repertoires, co-participates with the children to create productive learning zones in a routine literacy activity. This literacy activity encourages the children, often in collaboration with their *amigas/os*, to describe their various experiences at *Las Redes* each day. In particular, children are asked to recount to El Maga the ways in which they accomplish the various computer learning tasks and solve problems and to describe any difficulties they encounter playing the games. In addition to its role of sustaining the culture of *Las Redes*, Maga's mischievous and ambiguous qualities serve to motivate the children to solve what they believe is the central question of the 5th dimension: the identity and personal characteristics of El Maga.

The children and El Maga continuously engage in problem-solving exchanges in which they pose questions to one another hoping to achieve their own individual and shared goals. For example, El Maga often asks questions to help the children elaborate on statements made in previous e-mail texts. It is important to note that the children do not always answer Maga's questions. While this is one goal of the activity, the larger learning goal is to promote ongoing

communication and collaboration between the children and El Maga en route to literacy development. The larger database illustrates how this evolving relationship becomes the stimulus for elaborated writing and problem-solving.

Often, the children generate their topics and questions. For example, they hypothesize about who El Maga is, ask questions to help them resolve issues or conflicts that emerge in the club, or narrate events in their lives as members of larger communities. Often these exchanges occur with the assistance of an *amiga/o*. However, the extent and nature of assistance provided are dynamic and adaptable because ongoing dynamic assessment occurs in the moment-to-moment interactions between the children, the undergraduates, and El Maga (Stone & Gutiérrez, 1998).

Productive Joint Activity

In the following section, we will illustrate through four e-mail exchanges how El Maga and one child (and an overseeing undergraduate) interactionally constitute a dynamic space for learning. Note that the bi-directionality of the linguistic and sociocultural exchanges do not privilege the adult or more expert other as sole teacher and knowledge bearer. Utilizing mixed genres, discourses, and codes, El Maga and a young third grade bilingual Latina, Martha, share experiences and knowledge over a series of exchanges. In the first e-mail exchange, Maga and Martha discuss a game that Martha had just played. Typical of most first exchanges with El Maga, Martha details her experiences playing a computer game, in this case, Reader Rabbit II. Martha, like the other children, also inquires about Maga's personal life. Because Martha complains that the game is too easy, Maga encourages her to try a more difficult level of game

play. However, Maga also responds to her questions about Maga's personal life; the rapport-building process begins.

In the following week, Martha and Maga communicate again. Consistent with Martha's previous narrative, she describes her game playing activities and accomplishments, as well as the assistance she receives from one of the *amigas* when she encounters difficulties playing the game. Maga corroborates her frustration in playing the game and attributes part of the difficulty to the prankishness of the frog, the central character of the game.

E-mail Exchange #2:

E-mail from Martha to El Maga:

2/4/97

dear El Maga, are are you? the pond was little bit harder. I couldn't understand the game and Christina helped me figure it out. In the end, I passed the first level and I was surprised. thanks for writing to me.

E-mail from El Maga responding to Martha:

2/4/97

Dear Martha,

I am doing pretty good, thank you for asking!!! How are you?? I hope you still have that big smile!!! The pond was difficult to figure out, huh? That frog causes many of us problems. It has a mind of its own and sometimes it does not want to do what we program it to do. Que ranita...

I am glad that Christina helped you figure out the game. What kinds of things did you both do?? Did the frog do every thing you told it to do???

Write back,
El Maga

Note how El Maga's use of English and Spanish in the responses to Martha exemplifies how biliteracy is promoted in this setting. Of significance in the above rather routine e-mail exchange is Maga's strategic use of a single Spanish phrase ("*Que ranita*"/That mischievous, little frog) in an otherwise English only text. While this is not a new strategy utilized by Maga, it is the use of the phrase "*que ranita*" that requires not only shared linguistic knowledge but also sociocultural knowledge, in this case humor, that ultimately signals to Martha the appropriateness and usefulness of using Spanish in this problem-solving arena.

In a letter written six days later, there is a dramatic change in Martha's text evidenced in the language she chooses to narrate her activities, in the register she employs, and in the way she now begins to relate to El Maga.

E-mail Exchange #3:

E-mail from Martha to El Maga:

2/10/97

Querido/a
Yo no sabia que era bilingue. Usted es mujer o hombre? haora juque boggle, y un rompe cabesas de batman. y Bertha nos ayudo armarlo.
adios, Martha.

[Dear
I did not know that you were bilingual. Are you a man or a woman? Today I played boggle, and a batman puzzle. And Bertha helped us put it together.
goodbye, Martha]

Her use of Spanish in this text allows her to employ a formal register to demonstrate her biliterate skills and also to demonstrate her proficiency in Spanish. Central to this and subsequent responses is Martha's recognition that Maga is bilingual; this recognition and her biliteracy are instantiated in her production of a fluent Spanish text. Although she maintains the genre in Spanish, her salutation and closing are more affiliative and personalized ("*Querido/a*" and "*adios*") and are indices of a more intimate and familiar tone. Simultaneously, her use of a more formal register ("*que era bilingue*" and "*usted*") in Spanish indicates both respect and an attempt to build a relationship with Maga. This hybrid text provides Martha an opportunity to utilize her larger linguistic and cultural repertoire.

Martha's text also motivates the production of a Spanish text from Maga presented below. In doing so, Martha defines the conditions for language use and participation in this and subsequent texts, and stimulates a change in participant roles.

E-mail from El Maga responding to Martha:

2/10/97

Martha,

Claro que si amigita. Soy bilingue. Tu que crees que soy, hombre o mujer?? Como se juega Boggle, y como era el rompecabesas de batman?? Me gustaria que me escribas como juegas los juegos en *Las Redes* para que me enseñes a mi como juegar.

Espero tu proxima carta,
El Maga

[Martha,
Of course little friend. I am bilingual. What do you think I am, a man or a woman?? How do you play Boggle, and what was the batman puzzle like?? I would like you to write how to play the games at *Las Redes* so that you can teach me how to play.

I look forward to your next letter,
El Maga]

Here Maga explicitly identifies as a bilingual and produces a sustained response in Spanish; consequently, Maga signals co-membership in a Spanish-speaking community. Consistent with previous e-mail responses, El responds to all of Martha's queries and requests an elaboration of her game playing strategies. Martha again is provided an occasion to share her expertise.

Over a span of a few weeks of communication, Martha and Maga continue their collaboration in cyberspace. Martha once again exhibits her bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate knowledge and skills, although in this text she chooses English as the predominant medium of communication. Martha displays not only her fluency in both languages but also her ability to be humorous and play with language across cultures and codes.

E-mail Exchange #4:

E-mail from Martha to El Maga:

3/12/97

Dear La Maga

don't you like tortillas? Today I played La Corrida de Toros. The game was too easy for me, but in the hard level I was too confused because I didn't read the word list because I was too floja [lazy]. My brother gave me some candy. The candy was so delicious. Quiere probar some candy? [Would you want to try some candy?]You could.....buy it in the store! ha, ha, ha! I make you laugh. I'm funny today because today my boyfriend gave me a kiss. But in a picture! ha, ha, ha...La Maga, I decided that you are a girl to me because I am a girl and Oscar de la Hoya told me El Maga is mi admirador preferido [my biggest fan]..... see you later alligator! ha, ha, ha. I'm soooo happy.....because I'm scooby-doooooooooooooooooooo! Where are you?!!! I'm right here!! ha, ha, ha,

Martha

Martha's linguistic repertoire is sophisticated. Each switch from Spanish to English and vice versa is a conscious and strategic choice to accomplish several goals: 1) to complete the required literacy task of reporting on the day's activities; 2) to use this literacy text as a vehicle for self expression and 3) to build a sustained relationship with El Maga.

Martha's text is complex both linguistically and pragmatically. Key linguistic constructions range from words to complete units of thought. Her use of the word *floja* in her explanation of why she had difficulty with the more advanced game level (instead of the English word "lazy") serves as an emphatic assessment of her uncharacteristic performance playing the game. Martha is not limited to switches at the lexical level. She also engages larger units of text in Spanish, for example the clause *mi admirador preferido* [my biggest fan]. Some of these larger units are grammatically complex as in "*quiere probar some candy*?" [would you want to try some candy?] which uses a formal register in a complex syntactic structure.

Her text also presupposes shared knowledge of cultural norms and practices, the "funds of knowledge" Moll (1998) discusses in his work. For example, Martha alludes to a well-known Latino personality, Oscar de la Hoya, who she claims offers testimony to Maga's admiration of her. Similarly, she also draws on the larger popular culture by playing with familiar cartoon lyrics, "Scooby-Doo, where are you???", in the creation of a humorous text in both Spanish and English.

These new texts also begin to reveal characteristics of Martha that are consistent with her face-to-face interactions in *Las Redes*. As documented in fieldnotes and videotapes taken

by the adults, Martha is an outgoing, playful, and witty child who regularly shares jokes with those she trusts. Through the dynamic exchange of knowledge and role shift promoted in the culture of collaboration of *Las Redes*, Martha is socialized, over the course of three months, to use her complete repertoire to more fully participate in this playful, yet challenging environment. The socialization here, though, is bi-directional.

From a language socialization perspective, children are both socialized to use language and through language (Ochs, 1988). Thus, this literacy event serves a socializing practice in which children can appropriate sociocultural knowledge about the culture of *Las Redes*, its forms of participation and rules, and its academic, social and personal goals. Participants also receive explicit and implicit instruction about literacy, including the nuances of language use, spelling, vocabulary, sentence structure, and language play. In the context of their e-mail exchanges, they also learn how to write a letter, how to request assistance, and even how to generate a complaint about a practice of the after-school club. Simultaneously, El Maga and the other adult participants of *Las Redes* are socialized to children's linguistic, sociocultural, and academic experiences.

E-mail from El Maga responding to Martha:

3/12/97

Hi Martha,

Are you kidding--I love tortillas. I make my own. My mom taught me how to make them. Do you know how to make tortillas? If you do we must exchange "recetas" [recipes].

> You do make me laugh with your e-mail. Keep up the good work and please write me more like you wrote me today. Ha Ha Ha!
>
> Hay nos vamos, vimos, viendo,
> [We'll be seen/seeing each other]
> El Maga

In the above example, Maga mirrors Martha's linguistic strategies and writes a playful, informal, and predominantly English text. Maga again signals co-membership in a shared community by suggesting that the making of tortillas is an activity of Maga's home and a skill appropriated from El's mother. Maga also validates Martha's humor and encourages her to continue writing her playful e-mails. Finally, Maga also utilizes cultural humor by closing with a well-known phrase from the Mexican comedian Cantinflas ("Hay nos vamos, vimos, viendo"). Simultaneously, Maga builds on shared cultural knowledge and challenges Martha to extend her linguistic abilities and knowledge of Spanish by introducing her to sophisticated sentence structure and meaning.

Both of these last examples represent the kind of hybridity that serves to stimulate literacy learning and development. These findings support the empirical work of others, including Moll and Diaz (1987) who documented the dramatic gains in the learning of bilingual students who engaged in literacy practices that made use of their larger linguistic repertoires, including their home language, in literacy learning practices. In both cases, the object was learning.

In this article, our analysis of collaborative literacy learning at *Las Redes* has focused on how hybrid literacy practices stimulates joint participation and learning for all learners. By examining hybridity in practice, we have been able to see hybridity as a resource for literacy

learning where alternative, competing, and even shared discourses and positionings or roles mediate literacy for experts and novices. In this way, hybrid literacy activities become the mediational contexts and tools necessary for future social and cognitive development. There is an urgency for creating such rich contexts for learning— particularly in a time when English-only, anti-immigrant and anti-affirmative action sentiments influence, if not dominate, educational policy and practice. These hybrid literacy practices, embedded in a playful and stimulating learning environment, provide a model for understanding how meaningful collaboration can be created and sustained and how difference and diversity can serve as resources for learning.

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[i] The zone of proximal development is defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

[ii] This system-wide collaborative constitutes the University of California's response to recent legislative and regential initiatives that virtually truncate the educational pipeline for diverse and qualified students from elementary school through postdoctoral levels in communities throughout the state. The model links after-school K-12 activities with intensive undergraduate coursework combining classroom theoretical study with practice in community settings, in this case, *Las Redes.*