

Welcoming the Stranger:

Essays on Teaching and Learning in a Diverse Society

Introduction

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**WELCOMING THE STRANGER:
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INTRODUCTION

WELCOMING THE STRANGER: ESSAYS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING IN A DIVERSE SOCIETY

jonathan g. silin

Stories allow us to break through barriers and to share in another's experience; they warm us. Like a rap on the window, they call us to attention. Through literature and people's stories we discover a variety of situations that make people feel like strangers. We discover what strangers have to teach us.—Virginia Shabatay

This issue of *Occasional Papers* is filled with stories by and about “strangers”—people of all ages who perceive themselves or have been perceived by others as outsiders either because of who they are, where they have come from, or even how recently they have arrived in this country.¹

Successful educators know that the ability to welcome the stranger into the classroom, indeed an entire group of strangers each September, is essential to building a productive, caring community of learners. They know, too, that, from the point of view of students new to the school or society, the culture of the classroom may feel very strange. Welcoming teachers are willing to step outside of their own cultural frames to see the school from the student’s perspective.

Common purposes and goals emerge in classrooms only when there is a genuine sharing of the things that really matter to everyone present, not just when the rules and routines are posted. In classrooms where students can tell their stories, they come to feel safe, to know that they will be heard, and to recognize that they can legitimately hold on to parts of the past even as they move into the future. Students also learn that difficult emotions—uncertainty, ambiguity, loss—can be managed, contained, and shared rather than ignored or silenced.

Beyond the school itself, greeting the stranger is at the heart of the demo-

¹ I would like to thank Linda Levine, Brooke Nalle, and Fran Schwartz for their close readings of early drafts of this introduction.

cratic experience. In the post 9/11 world, that experience carries great ambivalence. Americans both welcome strangers and are fearful of the changes they may bring. Many political leaders, for example, talk about the need for tolerance and respect while simultaneously promulgating new restrictions on immigration, student visas, and travel.

Immigrants have played a foundational role in the demographic and economic expansion of this country. Less often noticed is the symbolic function they perform as well. Every new immigrant reminds us that America is a good place to be, a place that people choose to come, often at great peril and making huge sacrifices to do so.

Ironically, even as fewer and fewer people vote each year—and voting is the moment when we express a commitment to the consensual nature of our government—more and more immigrants take the oath of citizenship. In this way, they enact their commitment to the democratic ideals and practices that those who are already enfranchised neglect in shocking numbers.

The significance of becoming a citizen is brought home to me whenever I re-read Peter Balakian's *Black Dog of Fate* with my Bank Street graduate students. The description of his family's flight across Europe in the aftermath of the Armenian genocide brings with it a renewed understanding of the suffering that is caused by the displacement of whole populations. It also strengthens my appreciation for the rights and privileges of citizenship in a democracy. Balakian writes movingly about his father's transit to America during the 1920's:

My father's Aunt Astrid recalled that as the Balakians boarded the Berengaria in France for America, my father was complaining about the wrinkle in his woolen trousers. He was shouting, "Il faut repasser mon pantalon." He was making a commotion. Because my grandfather had gone ahead to set himself up in the practice of medicine, my grandmother was alone with her three young children and a family passport from a country that no longer existed. Republique Armenienne in flamboyant script. A ten-by-twelve-inch piece of parchment with a three-by-five-inch photo of the family. My father with a Beatle haircut wearing a

sailor suit. His eyes dark and playful. It's the spring of 1926. I think of him, not yet six, annoyed by the crease in his trousers. Trying to create order. The name of his birthplace has disappeared from the map, and the meaning of that map, too, has disappeared. I picture him leaning over the railing of the Berengaria, the Atlantic Ocean in the background.

How many students and their families bring with them experiences of being stateless, outsiders without recourse to any polity? What does it mean when your country of origin has been expunged from the map, and its peoples slaughtered and dispersed across the world?

The authors in *Welcoming the Stranger* all recognize the need to incorporate the histories and ways of knowing that students bring with them, along with assuming the responsibility for inculcating in them the knowledge and skills that will insure full participation in society.

Sladkova, Viladrich, and Freudenberg refer to “social inclusion” as the process through which the newly arrived find their voice in an already complex, cacophonous society. They describe an approach to social inclusion for adult immigrants that melds learning English at the same time as learning to negotiate our often-Byzantine health care system. They highlight programs that work and a new perspective on how to maximize the effectiveness of limited adult education opportunities.

Erika Duncan, an experienced essayist and memoirist herself, has taken on a commitment to helping adult woman write their own stories for the first time. The border crossings to which she refers in her title are geographic and cultural, interior and exterior. Her lessons about telling a story that will draw the reader in are as relevant for six-year-olds as they are for sixty-year-olds.

Elizabeth Park, a middle school ESL teacher and adjunct faculty member at Bank Street, draws on her Master’s research done at the College to describe how she learned to work with three challenging students. Park brings to life her passion for her subject matter, for knowing her students, and for learning while teaching. These are the foundations of an effective progressive pedagogy.

Together, we believe that these essays will give our readers fresh ideas about

welcoming the stranger in our midst. Whether you are drawn to the mature women taking the first steps to writing their own lives, the recently arrived immigrants struggling to provide basic necessities for their families, or the young teenagers learning to acclimate to a new language and the culture in which it is embedded, we think that everyone will be changed for having read these stories.

BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN ADULT EDUCATION,

PUBLIC SCHOOLS, AND HEALTH CARE: A STRATEGY TO PROMOTE SOCIAL INCLUSION

jana sladkova, anahi viladrich, nicholas freudenberg

Sunset Park Family Support Center brings together adult education and health and social services to provide an integrated one-stop hub for families in southwest Brooklyn. Sunset Park is a diverse, low income, Middle-Eastern, Latino, Eastern European, and Asian community that serves as home to many of the immigrants who have come to the U.S. in the last two decades. In the Support Center's Adult and Family Education Program, fifty languages can be heard in the classrooms and hallways as each year 700 students enroll in a variety of basic education, literacy, computer, and English-as-a-Second-Language classes. The Center also offers a reading program for preschool children and their parents; a volunteer program that provides outreach, advocacy, and translating services at the sponsoring hospital, Lutheran Medical Center; and many other social services. A new initiative has begun to link adult education with health education.

The Family Support Center illustrates a model of services that can help recent immigrants ease their transition to the U.S., help their children succeed in school, help them find the health services they need, and help them become more fully integrated into their community and political life. Unfortunately, few communities are able to provide recent immigrants with these services, and those that do lack the capacity to meet existing needs. At the Sunset Park Support Center, for example, 600 residents are on a waiting list for services.

Now as in the past, the United States is a country of immigrants. How our nation educates immigrants and their children; provides access to adequate health care, housing, and employment; and includes them in our political system will influence our ability to achieve our society's educational, health, economic, and moral goals. In this essay, we examine how adult education, a service that plays a key role in the lives of many recent immigrants, can act as a bridge for the immigrants and their families into both the educational and health care systems, and thus include them more fully in our society.

We focus on New York City because it, with a handful of other big cities,

serves as the entry point for the majority of recent immigrants and because of our experience working with newcomers as educators, providers, and researchers in NYC's adult education, school, and health care systems. Using our first hand experience and the relevant research, we describe some of the barriers to social inclusion that recent immigrants face; portray the adult education system in New York City and its linkages with schools and health care institutions; and recommend policies and programs that can strengthen these linkages and their capacity to promote recent immigrants' social inclusion. Finally, we provide some suggestions for teachers, adult educators, and health care providers to contribute towards a more integrated system to help recent immigrants and their families.

Immigration, Health, and Education

According to the 2000 Census, more than 28 million people living in the United States are foreign born, and immigrant children make up more than a fifth of the nation's children. These children often face difficult life circumstances: more than half are poor, yet benefit less from public programs than native-born children. In addition, a majority of young immigrant children have one or more parents with limited English proficiency (Capps et al., 2004).

In 2000, most immigrants lived in the gateway metropolitan areas of New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, and Miami. In these cities, the concentration of multi-national, foreign-born populations with different languages and socio-cultural backgrounds makes social inclusion a particularly daunting challenge. Both documented and undocumented immigrants face obstacles; for those who are undocumented, fear of deportation may prevent them from using even services that are available. As post-9/11 restrictions on legal immigration increase, the problems we describe here may become more significant.

Low levels of literacy and formal education present one such barrier. Literacy typically refers to the basic ability to read, write, and compute. According to the National Adult Literacy Survey (Weiss, 2005), more than half the immigrants who enter the United States after childhood have limited literacy in English, which makes it harder to find work at wages that can support a family, to help one's children succeed in school, and to get needed health care.

As most teachers are aware, children of immigrants consistently face obstacles in public schools. They are less likely to attend comprehensive preschool programs, have lower scores on reading and math tests, are more likely to be placed in special education programs, or left back than native born children, rarely have access to bilingual programs, and are more likely to drop out of school (Capps et al., 2004; Takanishi, 2004). These barriers reduce the likelihood that immigrant children will attend college, move up the economic ladder, maintain good health, and become full participants in society.

Immigrant families also face economic, language, and socio-cultural obstacles to securing adequate health care. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (DeNavas et al., 2004) in 2003, foreign-born U.S. residents were two-and-a-half times more likely to lack health insurance than the native born. Children of immigrants are at least twice as likely to be uninsured, report fair or poor health, or lack a regular source of care (Capps, 2004). While the number of immigrants in the U.S. has continued to grow, fewer are eligible for health insurance, including Medicaid (Ku & Matani, 2001), due to legal restrictions on public benefits for legal immigrants passed in 1996 (Sherman, 1999; Fix and Tumlin, 1998; Kullgren 2003, Kandula et al., 2004). Undocumented immigrants face even greater obstacles to getting health insurance. As fewer Americans are now covered by employer-based health insurance than in the past, it is likely that un-insurance rates among immigrants will continue to grow.

Immigrants also face problems communicating with their health providers (Viladrich, 2003). Although the number of languages spoken in the US has been steadily growing over the past three decades, most hospitals offer limited or no translation services (Jacobs et al., 2004). Moreover, reductions in funding have reduced the quality and quantity of hospital interpreting services, which were already inadequate to satisfy the increasing demand (Perkins et al., 1998). State and federal laws mandate hospitals and doctors to provide translators and bilingual services, but these policies are rarely enforced and many immigrants are not aware of the laws (Ku & Matani, 2001).

These language barriers adversely affect health care for immigrants (Diaz, 1997; Elderkin-Thompson et al., 2000; Flores et al., 1998; Schur & Albers, 1996;

Valdez 1993). Lack of language skills and insufficient translation services can lead patients to distort or provide incomplete descriptions of symptoms as well as misunderstand doctors' prescriptions, follow-ups, and medical alternatives (Elderkin-Thompson et al., 2001; Gany and Bocanegra, 1996).

Languages barriers may also compound access problems. A study on the association between parents' language of interview and access to health care among their children with special needs found that non-English speaking parents were more likely to belong to disadvantaged groups, and experienced more barriers to health care, than English-speaking parents (Yu et al., 2004).

Finally, immigrants may experience socio-cultural barriers to care. Providers may not be familiar with their health beliefs or cultural practices; may assume that all Hispanics or all Asian immigrants are homogenous and share similar beliefs (Weinick et al, 2004); or may be unfamiliar with their patients' knowledge and resources regarding behaviors that influence health, such as folk healing practices. Ultimately, these communication problems can lead to poorer health outcomes.

Health literacy has been defined as "the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions" (Healthy People, 2010). While many people in the U.S. count on few health literacy skills, immigrants, especially those with limited formal education, face unique problems in communicating with health providers or overcoming bureaucratic obstacles due to their lack of familiarity with the U.S. health system and their limited health information. In addition, low-income immigrants often lack basic literacy in any language, making it difficult for them to read and understand health messages, instructions, and prescriptions provided in any written form.

A recent review (Tassi, 2004) concluded that people with lower levels of health literacy had worse overall health status, arrived for treatment at later stages of disease, presented higher rates of hospitalization and less knowledge of health and disease, and had difficulty understanding and using health information.

Social Inclusion

British and European social welfare analysts use the term “social exclusion” to refer to a process that results from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, and bad health (Micklewright, 2002). The antidote to this negative cycle is “social inclusion,” a set of policies and programs that draw excluded populations into the mainstream and seek to mitigate the harmful effects of exclusion.

Immigrants in the U.S. face challenges in protecting their health, helping their children to succeed in school, and becoming involved in the social and political life in this society. Each problem can amplify others. For example, poor health and school failure make it more difficult to earn a decent income; illiteracy often limits participation in community politics, which can lead to loneliness, ostracism, and social exclusion. Anti-immigrant prejudice and orchestrated campaigns to limit immigrants’ access to education and health care can exacerbate this negative cycle. Ultimately, immigrants’ social exclusion can harm society as a whole, contributing to racial and ethnic conflict; community health problems, such as epidemic disease or low immunization rates; and finally, to a lack of an educated, informed citizenry and workforce. On another level, excluding immigrants from mainstream society undermines a core American value rooted in the principle that we are members of a nation that welcomes citizens from any nationality who arrive here in search of a better life for themselves and their families. In the next section, we examine whether adult education can play a role in successfully including immigrants in the United States.

Adult Education in the United States

Adult education includes such components as: basic education (BE), which focuses on literacy skills; basic education in a native language; programs preparing adults for the General Education Diploma exam (a high school graduation equivalency diploma); English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL); citizenship preparation; and computer literacy. ESOL programs for immigrants have been the fastest growing components of state-administered adult education programs, increasing from 33% of participants in 1993 to 48% in 1999 (NIFL, 2002).

Adult education has a long tradition in the United States (Sticht, 2002);

one of its principal goals has always been to bring recent immigrants into mainstream society. During the Progressive Era, wealthy reformers, foundations such as Ford and Carnegie, and various professional organizations of educators joined forces to create a national network of adult educators and programs. During the Great Depression, many of these programs lost support; however, in the 1960s' War on Poverty, adult literacy again became a federal focus and several new national programs were created.

By the last decade of the twentieth century, nearly forty million people were enrolled in the U.S. Adult Education and Literacy System programs (AELS), (Sticht, 1998) and almost a quarter of them were estimated to be foreign-born (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Between 1965 and 1999, federal funding for adult education increased almost twenty fold (Sticht, 1998). However, in the last two decades, the proportion of federal support for adult education has declined while local and state support has increased.

While these programs and their funding sources are distributed throughout the United States, the delivery and quality of services and the approaches to teaching and learning vary tremendously. Only since the 1990s have government-funded programs been mandated to report their outcomes under the National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS).¹ Many recent adult immigrants, in an effort to improve their English and to advance their formal education, participate in one or more of these programs, including ESL, GED, and citizenship.

In New York City, more than half the children under the age of seven are growing up in immigrant families; in many of these families, no one over the age of thirteen speaks English well (Bernstein, 2004). Between 1990 and 2000, the number of adults who had a problem speaking English increased by more than 30%, to more than 1.5 million. According to one city official, this growth in non-English speaking adults is now affecting the education of the next generation

¹ The NRS is a "project to develop an accountability system for the federally funded adult education program. This system includes a set of student measures to allow assessment of the impact of adult education instruction, methodologies for collecting the measures, reporting forms and procedures, and training and technical assistance activities to assist states in collecting the measures." (Division of Adult Education and Literacy, 2001).

(Bernstein, 2005). Almost half the adults without proficiency in English in NYC have not graduated from high school, compared to 27% of all New Yorkers who are eighteen years of age or older (Bernstein, 2005).

New York City has one of the nation's largest and most developed adult education systems. Since 1984, the New York City Adult Literacy Initiative (NYCALI), a unique urban system of adult education, has brought together a wide variety of adult education providers, including 13 campuses of the City University of New York (CUNY), about 40 Community Based Organizations (CBOs), 175 NYC Department of Education (DOE) sites, and 23 branches of the public library systems in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens.

These literacy agencies are supported by a common stream of funding administered jointly by the NYC's Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) and by the New York State Department of Education. According to the latest available report (LAC, 2002), NYCALI has served nearly 500,000 adult students in the last ten years. Classes are offered during the day, evening, and on weekends to accommodate the complex lives of adult students. While in 1985, the majority of students in these programs were enrolled in BE classes and two-fifths in ESOL classes, by 2001, more than half were in ESOL programs, reflecting recent immigrants' growing participation. While students of all ages over 16 attend, the majority of the students enrolled in these programs are between 25 and 44 years old and two-thirds are female. Ethnically, NYC's adult education programs represent the diversity of the city's population. In some programs, students speak more than 20 native languages. Still, the majority of students are Latino, except in the BE programs, where most are of African descent.

Participants rate these programs highly. A recent survey of 400 students in the CBO programs revealed that over 90% rated their program as excellent or very good. Students liked their teachers: their main complaint was that the classes met for too few hours per week. A formal longitudinal study conducted across the NYCALI programs provided "strong evidence that participation in BE and ESOL programs has a positive impact on many aspects of adult learners' lives. The effects of improved skills are felt at work and in the search for employment; they are recognized when reading and writing to children and interacting with children's

schools; and they have positive social implications through the increased use of literacy skills and English speaking ability in a variety of group and community activities” (Albert & D’Amico, 1991).

Despite the diversity and breadth of its adult education programs, New York City lacks the capacity to meet the educational needs of recent immigrants and other populations, such as adults with low literacy skills or those who could not finish regular high school. This is reflected by the fact that most adult literacy and ESOL programs have long waiting lists. Even the additional family literacy programs, which offer about 45,000 seats to both adults and their children, are not enough to cover the increasing demand. Most of these programs are located outside of immigrant neighborhoods. For example, in NYC, more than 40% are located in Manhattan and less than 10% in Queens, the borough with the highest proportion of recent immigrants (Bernstein, 2005). In addition to limited seats, many potential learners fear that programs will check their immigration status or ask for social security numbers, a policy increasingly demanded by funding sources attempting to track down how many students are served (Bernstein, 2005).

Adult Education Programs as Bridges: Innovative Approaches

Integrating health education into adult basic education and ESOL classes is not a novel idea, as it has been shown that health-related lessons increase students’ interest in learning and in remaining within the educational system. In fact, many of the first health education programs in the United States had recent immigrants as their focus and teaching American health and hygiene standards as their aim. Public schools, settlement houses, and municipal health centers were among the settings for these early efforts (Markel and Golden, 2004).

Health educators and adult educators began to develop renewed links in the early 1990s (Rudd, 2002). Local initiatives led to “development of adult education curricula on specific topic areas such as breast and cervical cancer or smoking prevention. The idea of integrating health topics into adult learning centers was based on the assumption that health curricula would enhance the goals of the health field while also supporting the goals of adult education.” (Rudd, 2002: 5) Educational programs can be unique venues for reaching immigrant students and

their families, particularly if they aim at improving immigrants' language and cognitive skills, while also promoting social solidarity and social justice among immigrant groups (Blewett, et al., 2004; Blake, et al., 2001).

The increased importance of health literacy has been reflected in the creation of health literacy initiatives, as well as in the integration of health education into BE and ESOL curricula in diverse programs across the country. To illustrate diversity of these programs, we provide brief overviews of two programs in Massachusetts and California, and a more detailed description of one in New York City.

The Massachusetts and California Health Literacy Programs

Since 1994, the Massachusetts Adult Health Literacy Effort has created more than fifty adult basic education programs with comprehensive health projects. These are based on a peer-leadership model and a participatory framework inspired by the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (Freire, 1983). According to this approach, learners critically analyze life experiences in order to learn new skills and prepare for social action that will lead them to improve their life circumstances. Freirian methods have been used in both adult literacy and health education in the developed and the developing world (Hohn, 2004).

In the Massachusetts model, teams of five to ten students, along with a facilitator, carry out health-related projects. The teams, whose members get paid for participating, work with teachers, community health organizations, and health practitioners to engage other students in health-related activities through peer teaching. After identifying learners' common interests, the teams conduct research and teach other students about diet and exercise, cancer and smoking, and HIV/AIDS. This approach both enhances knowledge about health and supports more traditional literacy skills.

Preliminary evaluations of the Massachusetts program show that participants were enthusiastic about their learning experiences. Students expanded their health vocabulary and increased their ability to communicate about health issues, leading to increased skills and confidence. Students reported that finding out about community health services and learning about concepts such as prevention

and early detection of disease made them feel they had more control over their own and their families' health. (Hohn, 2004:18).

The California Health Literacy Initiative, launched by California Literacy, a non-profit organization, demonstrates a different approach to integrating health into adult education. To make health literacy a higher priority, California Literacy organized a task force of health care providers, health educators, public health directors, language access advocates, adult education directors and practitioners, and representatives from community-based organizations (Rothchild, 2004). The overall aim was to prepare adult literacy tutors and professionals to present health information to adults with limited literacy skills, to develop quality standards for low health and low literacy populations that are accepted by the medical community; and to organize work groups on various health issues. To achieve this goal, they created an online health literacy center for adult educators, health care professionals, adult learners, and policymakers; and conducted an awareness campaign directed at health care professionals and low literate adults (Rothchild & Bergstrom, 2004).

New York City Health Literacy Initiative

In 2004, the Literacy Assistance Center (LAC) of New York City, the Mayor's Office and New York City Adult Literacy Initiative (NYCALI) launched the Health Literacy Initiative (HLI). The HLI seeks to improve family health by encouraging partnerships between literacy and healthcare providers; and by creating a professional development model for adult educators to infuse health literacy into their teaching curricula (MAGI Educational Services, Inc., 2004).

Several adult literacy programs, including the Sunset Park program described earlier, have taken part in HLI by providing additional professional development for their staffs, by partnering with health care providers in their communities, and by devoting a portion of their classes to health. LAC developed three modules for its community participants: navigating the American health care system, chronic disease management, and illness prevention. Then they offered teachers professional development in these topics. This key component of HLI utilized Study Circle Plus, a participatory approach to teaching and

learning, in which educators rely on health-related information and materials for the purpose of satisfying their students' particular needs (MAGI, 2004).

At Sunset Park, the health care providers from Lutheran Medical Center were eager to participate in this initiative so they could better communicate with patients, better inform the community of the health and health care options the Center offers, and become a more informed community institution. Administrators, teachers, and counselors of the adult literacy program and the health center met to plan the program. As part of the program's curriculum, students discussed health issues relevant to them and their families, practiced making appointments over the phone, and planned for an actual visit to the health center in class. Prior to the visit, students chose illnesses or injuries they would describe to a provider, learned relevant vocabulary, discussed health insurance issues, and practiced conversations. During the actual visit, which took place when the health center was closed to the public, students completed an entire mock patient visit and had the opportunity to interact with all the center's staff, including its nurses, doctors, health assistants, and administrators.

Six months after it started, MAGI Educational Services conducted an independent evaluation of the first phase of HLI. Evaluators reported that adult learners said that the health literacy classes had helped them to better their own and their families' lives, and that their language and literacy skills had been strengthened as a result of their participation. Teachers found that the health care partnerships enhanced students' and their own health literacy (MAGI, 2004).

In summary, the New York City and the Massachusetts and California State programs demonstrate that adult educators and health providers can work together, identify and reduce system barriers, engage recent immigrants in a variety of services, and contribute to improved literacy and more confident use of health services.

Recommendations

Our review of the barriers experienced by recent immigrants, and the impact of adult education programs aimed at addressing these problems, provides both bad and good news. On the negative side, many immigrants face serious

problems getting the health care they need, educating their children, and becoming fully included in our society. Moreover, newcomers' needs for adult education, health care, and education seem to be increasing faster than the supply of these services. Recent and proposed cuts at the local, state, and federal levels suggest that in coming years the problems may get worse, not better.

The good news is that innovative models for adult education programs that can serve as a bridge into the educational and health care system are available; that dedicated workforces in adult education and health care provide valuable resources for policy change; and that immigrants bring a determination, resilience, and energy into their goal of inclusion.

So where do we go from here? From our perspectives as practitioners and researchers in New York City communities, we believe both bottom up and top down changes are needed. From the bottom up, local partnerships can develop, implement, and evaluate model programs that bring together key players, prepare immigrants to participate in the political arena, and advocate for additional educational and health care resources—particularly in communities with high numbers of immigrants. In addition, teachers, adult educators, and health professionals can learn about the resources in these domains and help families find the services they need. Local networks of teachers, adult educators, and health workers can play an important role in advocating for more coordinated services, opposing discriminatory policies or practices, and promoting social inclusion. Neighborhood health centers, adult education programs, immigrants' rights groups, or educational advocacy groups can serve as conveners of such grassroots efforts.

From the top down, K-12 and higher education, adult education, and health care officials can bring the right people together to address system barriers so they can begin to design seamless and comprehensive programs. In NYC, as we have described, some of these efforts have already begun, and show the promise of this approach. Nevertheless, additional resources will be needed to make such collaborative efforts meaningful. In addition, elected officials should advocate for additional resources and fight cutbacks and discriminatory policies at higher levels of government. Universities can also play a more proactive role. In most universities, those enrolled in community health education, adult education, and primary

and secondary education professional programs rarely meet or learn about how to collaborate across systems to improve services for their students. By developing more interdisciplinary courses and internships, universities can better prepare their graduates to meet the needs of recent immigrants.

On the political front, proposals to limit immigrants' access to health care, public education, or civil liberties risk further excluding newcomers from the mainstream; they also violate basic American principles. When professional organizations of teachers and health providers oppose these measures, they add political clout to those advocating inclusion and they demonstrate to immigrant communities that they can be trusted to act on behalf of their students and patients.

Through these and other efforts we hope to promote a dialogue on what our nation stands for in regard to immigration; and we can combat social exclusion and identify new strategies to improve the health and education of all Americans.

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CROSSING BORDERS / SHAPING TALES

erika duncan

What do we encounter when we invite those whose stories have been silenced and unsung to write intimate materials for an audience of “stranger-listener/readers”? What part do we play in navigating the divide between welcoming expression which might or might not find a listening ear, and teaching those forms that can break the barriers of marginalization?

In order to answer these questions, I want to tell the story of a community memoir-writing project I founded in the spring of 1996, more than three decades after Tillie Olsen published the first portions of what would become her groundbreaking book, *Silences*, in *Harper’s Magazine*.

Back in the late sixties and early seventies, many of us were caught up in the heady struggle to help one another break away from what Tillie Olsen described as “the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being and cannot. In the old, the obvious parallels: when the seed strikes stone; the soil will not sustain; the spring is false; the time is drought or infestation; the frost comes premature.”

By the mid-nineties, we were more sober. We had worked hard to make sure that women’s writing about their own lives would not be relegated to the private journal or diary. We had entered an era in which we could at last take for granted that the stories of ordinary women and men would be wanted by a reading public that increasingly sought out accounts of the triumphs and struggles of those who previously would have remained unseen and anonymous.

First-person narratives began to be sought, with unknown names attached to them. No longer were novelists, clinicians, or historians the ones to tell people’s stories for them. But still the gaps remained. For many who held stories inside them, educational deficiencies and lack of time and financial resources made it impossible to acquire the complex narrative skills that change one’s own story, as told to a close friend or diary, a court or a gathering of family, into something that would appeal to wider audiences.

At that time there were numerous community-based workshops offering both a listener base and encouragement of self expression. However, in the part of Long Island where I lived, nothing was available that provided economically and educationally disadvantaged people with the kind of intensive work with narrative technique and structure that is needed to construct a viable book.

The words of Tillie Olsen's *Silences* were very much present inside me when I offered to give a week of free workshops to any woman in the community who wished to tell her story, never dreaming that ten years later, Herstory Writers Workshop¹, as we came to be called, would turn into a community writing project with fourteen branches on Long Island, including three workshops for women incarcerated in Suffolk County's two prisons, and a growing Latina project that reaches out to Long Island's migrant workers—nor that we would be publishing a bilingual literary magazine.

Until that March morning when I opened the doors of the Town of Southampton Cultural Center, where I would be holding my first free workshop, I had felt that for intimate or painful stories it was absolutely necessary to have a consistent audience and a certain amount of privacy. Workshop members would need to count on that, as they were opening themselves up on the page. I hadn't realized how my thinking would change in a setting in which nothing prevented a stranger from walking in just as a participant was in the middle of crafting an intimate revelation.

By the time I had second thoughts about whether such a public format would work for material so private, it was too late to turn back. To make the best of what I assumed was a bad situation, I found myself helping each speaker to playact how she would most want to be heard by the "stranger/reader," walking in on her life on whatever "page one moment" she would choose.

What I didn't take into account when I devised this exercise was the way that responses to capturing the caring of a stranger could bring students of all backgrounds into the sort of narrative study that could sustain them for years.

¹The name Herstory, taken from early Feminist Days, and deeply belonging to others before us, was attached to the conference through which I was invited to give my workshops, and stuck, even with the awareness that it had been widely used.

This would become increasingly important to those of us concerned with the urgency of “diversity.” For it allowed college professors and already published writers to work on level ground with those whose life circumstances had allowed for little formal schooling. It allowed for work across race, class, age, and culture, as women who had little in common save for their desire to turn their memories to memoirs worked together side by side for the months and often years it takes to write a book.

Writing for the Stranger

When we write for a stranger, we are asking her to cross a border, out of her experience into our own. We cannot lure a reader into making a crossing unless we provide her a path. In making sure that our Herstory groups each contain women whose life experiences set them apart from one another, we give our participants a chance to test their pathways from the start.

For the sake of this article, I am choosing border crossings that were not only fraught with drama but, in addition, were likely to create strong responses—whether of support, curiosity, standoffishness, moral judgment, or disdain—depending on the reader’s preconceived feeling about each of the situations described.

The first story involved a newly trans-gendered woman, who came to Herstory wanting to begin her book at the moment of her sex change operation. Would that make her “just any” trans-gendered woman? I found myself musing while watching the faces of the women in the room reflecting responses to the situation presented left over from the time before they met the teller. Might our teller find another spot in which we would come to know the wishes and dreams that had led up that moment, so that even those who might be shocked or disapprove might be with her by the time she arrived there? Or would such a narrative choice just be pandering to those who might be prejudiced? What did it mean to introduce those questions into the moment of choosing?

The second story involved an Islamic woman who wanted to write around the theme of climbing over the walls and removing the veils that had surrounded her mother’s growing up years, which still cast their shadows on her life. Again I

had found myself wondering: How were we to find her a starting point specific enough to evoke our personalized caring, yet broad enough to cradle her story within her chosen theme?

The third example involved a woman wishing to start her narrative on the brink of taking her six children to a shelter. As we set her into evaluating which part of the story would trigger the movement back to the cause of her leaving, as well as the movement forward into her new life, the same questions that came up in all border crossing narratives were raised.

Finding a Way In

In our training workshops, and in our ongoing groups, I often speak of how hard it is to have a character die or make love on page two, before the reader has had the opportunity to particularize either the loss or the joy.² I speak of finding a moment in which the circumstances will fast forward us into a caring we cannot possibly have at the start, whether those circumstances arise out of action in which the reader will need to join the narrator right away, or from what Virginia Woolf so eloquently labels “moments of being.”

For example, if I were to bring out pictures of my twin grandchildren, any viewer would of course say “how cute,” because she wouldn’t have much choice, but she wouldn’t really care about them unless she knew me. So too, is it difficult to start with a moment of fear of being turned back at a border—if one doesn’t yet know what “back” is for that narrator, nor what forward journey she dreams.

It is tricky to start at the moment of choosing to undergo a very radical change—whether of gender, geographical placement, or station in life—unless the person immediately backtracks into scenes and memories that pave the way for the “change from what?”

If the crossing is fraught with danger, these difficulties will be both obscured by voyeuristic curiosity and heightened.

²There are, of course, wonderful exceptions to this in literature. My favorite is the opening page of Maxim Gorky’s autobiographical trilogy, where the death occurs on page one, not two, and becomes a way into the rest of the narrator’s story. We are not asked to care for the person who died.

Where Human Rights Education and the Study of Narrative Structure Overlap

On the day that Donna Riley first joined us, she told us that she wanted to write about the transition from her life as a man, starting with the moment of her sex change operation.

Would that make her “just any” trans-gendered woman “crossing a border?” I asked myself. Was there a way to find the specificity that would draw the reader into the person instead of the situation, so that pre-existing feelings in the reader wouldn’t take over right away?

Rather than deflate Donna’s desire to start there, I dared her not to tell us the whole story, but rather to map out the first scene as the reader would encounter it when she opened Donna’s book, as if she were placing a telephoto lens over the scene.

This is very different from the way we would normally ask people to introduce themselves, and creates fertile ground, even as it forms a safe boundary, in which the book or story (the object being made) is separated from the teller.

As Donna tried out what might happen if she kept within the boundaries of her chosen moment, the tag ends that kept popping out concerned her wife of twenty years, a woman with whom she still lived and whom she still loved. What would happen, I wondered, if she picked a moment previous to the day of the surgery, in which we might meet her and her wife in a manner that would particularize the story? That way, by the time we were ready to undergo the amputation of a vital bodily member, the tale would already be propelled by many threads.

However I didn’t want to pull Donna’s story in that direction out of my own interest in stories of love between women. Nor did I wish to let any of the other students, out of their own curiosity, tempt her to towards narrative choices that she wouldn’t ordinary make.

Only after I had let her meander for a while did I find myself saying, “It is hard to imagine amputating a penis if we don’t yet know how the teller feels about that penis, and yet, to play devil’s advocate one could start with the shock value of that moment, in which the reader, because of her own strong reaction whatever it might be, would be deeply engaged.” It was then that Donna started to tell us a story of how she had been a mortgage broker who worked in a bank and sported a three-piece suit.

Note, now, how we could have gone in a different direction that left the two women behind, as Donna happily regaled us with details about the fight that occurred in the bank where she was working during the time of transition, when management couldn't decide which bathroom she should use and concluded that she shouldn't be allowed to use any; how that coincided in time with her ceasing to be Douglas, leading her to leave the bank, taking with her the ten employees she supervised, as she took her first new job as Donna.

Note how different in tone a story starting in this way might be. It is like being a composer and trying to determine what key to be in, or being a painter and deciding whether to work in siennas and ochres or to sport shocking primary colors.

Note also how having several beginnings on the floor not only increases images of possible structures, but gives the teller time to try them on for size, to see which one best fits her temperament.

If you give just one example, the student is likely to seize it. If you give nine or ten, the examples will be so blurred with one another that the student is almost forced to come up with an eleventh that will be truly her own.

Present in that workshop session was Rukhsana Ayyub, who was writing about her attempt to escape the world of her foremothers, who had lived behind veils and high walls. As I thought about how working with structure makes a safe space for every sort of content, I couldn't help pondering what Rukhsana might be thinking about Donna's tale.

As I wondered whether one would judge the other, I thought about the meaning of "just any" (whether day-laborer at a border, Islamic woman behind a veil, or trans-gendered woman at a crossroad.)

"Let us leave your beginning for now, so that you can daydream yourself a bit more into the page one process," I said to Donna, knowing that as one after another of the other workshop participants would speak, Donna's sense of her own shape would deepen.

I suggested that Rukhsana tell the tale of her first Herstory workshop session. When I had asked Rukhsana to feel her way into shaping her opening scene, she told us that when she was trying to find our meeting place in West Babylon

she had gotten lost and found herself going around and around under various tunnels that ran under the highway near the community center where we met.

“When you asked for my page one,” she explained now to Donna, “I kept thinking of how I felt going under those tunnels and how when I was a little girl our house had a very low wall around it and one day I made a tunnel under it. You see, even though it was only a low wall, and my father had taken my mother into a free marriage, my mother was still trapped in the way she had grown up and didn’t want her children to go outside of the wall. I crawled through the tunnel, and when I came up on the other side of the wall, I could see that my mother was smiling at me.”

She added, “I am still in an arranged marriage, and I guess I am writing to see where I will come up.”

I don’t remember much about the other stories that were worked on that day. Amy was weaving a memory portion, while Rose experimented with keeping her prose choppy in a moment when her players were out of control. Lonnie was adding new smells and sensations.

I waited until Donna had heard all of the readings before asking her to take another go at imagining her opening scene. Showing ways in which each reader was playing with which area of her story held the others, I put forward the possibility of introducing the two women together as they prepared for the change. That would be one way, I said, to fast forward us into knowing enough of the story, so that by the time of the operation we would be inside, instead of standing on the outside looking in.

Then we talked for a while about whether Donna would rather go with the scene at the bank with the bathrooms, which would open her book in one kind of tone, or select a love moment between the women. Again, what was critical here was our stepping back once we helped her to generate the choices. Donna did choose the love relationship idea, for, as I had sensed right away when she had spoken of her wife’s support of her feeling of being born in the wrong body, this tale would be central in the narrative of her transition.

We asked Donna to pick out a setting or occasion or two in which we might meet the women, and to image out each one for us as concretely and spon-

taneously as possible, knowing that the next day or the next, when she was in the shower, or daydreaming while making her morning tea, the real opening scene would appear.

Note that without playing out the imaging, very often what will be born will be something that will be either too detached or will flood the reader with too much right away, or else it will be a scene that will not possess the dynamism to lead to the next scene and the next. Even if the scene is changed, the idea of what might propel a work forward (while opening for us a doorway into knowing the teller) is provided.

A week later, Donna came in with a scene picturing two (as yet unknown) women walking along a pier in Sag Harbor, as a gentle breeze brushes their long flowing skirts against their legs and a man in the distance calls out, “Hi ladies!”

The narrator is elated at the call, but the other woman begins to cry, finally saying, “I love you, but I don’t know if I can be a lesbian.” From there the story of the narrator’s feeling that she was born in the wrong body rapidly unfolds, as we learn that the crying woman is the narrator’s wife of twenty years and that this is the first time the couple has gone out in public with both of them dressed in female clothes.

Did Donna plan what would be flashback and what would move forward? Of course not! Did she say to herself, “Now I will use this image to reveal this fact that the reader must know”? We knew that she didn’t. However, the work we had done the week before to make sure that she was situated in a moment of narrative potential gave her parameters through which she might work out of interiority and action at once.

In another couple of pages, we the listener/readers learned for the first time of the existence of a twenty-year-old son, through a scene in which the crying woman begins to speak of her fear of “telling him.” Did it surprise us that Donna who had never written creatively before could use dialogue and internal monologue with a rhythm that moved her story at a speed that worked well?

Without leaving the scene that Donna created on the page, we learned of the impending sex change operation, and were set up in both suspense and caring for how the story would move forward, even while our wondering at how the

women had arrived at this point deepened.

It was easy to point out the sort of questions that would keep the reader turning page after page. “Would the two women make it together? What would it mean to one when her partner was no longer a man? What would it be like?”

As soon as Donna stopped reading, Rose looked up with tears in her eyes. “So it really is a love story,” she said. And those words, in turn, helped Donna reveal even more deeply the emotion that existed in this border crossing that one woman needed and the other one feared, so that for all the listeners, the courage to touch their own needs and fears grew greater.

That night in the parking lot, Rukhsana came over to me. “You know, I never felt I belonged anywhere,” she said, “but tonight I understood that none of us belong, and I felt I belonged perfectly.”

Meanwhile Rukhsana was working out a narrative dilemma of her own. No two students have the same way of nesting story within story, which is part of the pleasure of teaching, but each can draw structural inspiration from the others. That allows content to belong sacredly to the teller, while the structure becomes the meeting ground.

In order to tell the tale of her own life, Rukhsana felt she needed to speak of how her mother had the first love marriage in her village, how her father had made a sort of ceremony of breaking with tradition, removing the veil and taking her out from within the high walls. She could easily recite the facts. But could she put herself back there, becoming the listening child who first heard the stories? Would putting herself back there explain why, when it came time for Rukhsana to marry, her mother became frightened and pulled her backwards?

Rukhsana had written a scene describing those rare occasions when her grandfather used to allow the women of the household to go down to the river to cool off on very hot nights, when it was too dark for them to be seen.

... there they would sit still wrapped and covered up and soak their feet in the water. Nano would loosen the strap of her burqa under her chin; the girls would loosen the chadors wrapped around their shoulders and feel the cool air coming off the water...

The river flowed fast at their feet. None of them knew how to swim or had ever dared enter the water. Mom says she loved the speed of the water, even though it used to scare her. She was always careful as she sat down on the steps to soak her feet, for she was so afraid of being carried away by the current. That was what had happened to two older cousins [while the women on the shore] had sat there shocked, literally biting their hands, for fear of letting out a cry, fear that Grandpa would be angry with them for raising their voices. Fortunately a late night fisherman had seen the two of them bobbing up and down [in] the water quietly and had pulled them out.

In telling this second-hand story, Rukhsana had embellished the scene by the river. However, in order to make it her own, we knew it needed to be nested in the context and time period in which she had received it. As we had helped Donna develop her scene of the pier in Sag Harbor, so we helped Rukhsana to search for her own river scene:

[My brother and I] would be running ahead of [our parents], my brother in shorts and tee shirt and me in a little frock that mother had sewn in the design from English magazines that Dad would bring home. Sometimes I would get loud and scream and insist on taking the frock off so that I could go into the water in my underwear. Mom would get very quiet and then she would tell me the story not too long ago of her and her cousins' visit to the river in the quiet of the night.

What was heady for the group members was the way each person's scene evolved week after week in response to the shared questions around structure. It didn't matter whether what was added was a sensation such as wind blowing a woman's skirt worn outdoors for the first time against bare legs, or a description of a girl's frock on a hot day that called up dialogue, forgotten thoughts, and the whole being of a long-ago self, which, unrecorded, might have been lost.

A week later Rukhsana was able to add:

I used to find it so hard to believe the story and would ask my mother again and again, "Really Ma, really, you never even uttered a cry on seeing your cousins drift away in the river and neither did your cousins scream as they were floating away?" I would then try and imagine how I would react if I saw someone drowning away in the water. My brother and I would try and make different sounds as we ran along the river banks pretending to see girls drowning. Mother would blush and laugh. Then Dad would start a long monologue about how ridiculously old-fashioned Nano's whole family was.

Teaching techniques for the creation of drama, along with helping the speaker know that we genuinely want to care about what a situation means to each player, allows the slowing down that makes it possible for the writer to recreate happenings so that she may truly experience them, even as she is putting them to rest.

When we pick out the big things (the big border crossings or the big social agendas) we become stuck. It is in little ways, in learning to expand once again those small moments of being, that the big picture becomes clear, and the particularity of the teller emerges from its shyness to speak.

The fact that each structural conundrum we ask our students to ponder has no right answer is part of the appeal. I have noticed that my students at all levels love to work together to figure what works and why. So now, through the work of the third woman, Paulette Sellers, let us look at a situation in which it did work to start the narrative at the exact moment when she decides to take her six children to a shelter. Note the pacing of this passage, reproduced in its original written form:

I can still here it all in my mind as if a record is skipping. Wait I am coming, please give me five minutes. I ran up the stair tripping over my own feet You kids come on, they look at me as if I had lost my mind. I said with a tremble in my voice, you coming or staying. I grab some

clothes and pamper for the baby and told the other kids to get them some clean clothes we would be gone for a while. I told them when we reach the bottom of the stair don't stop nothing, get out side and get in the car and lock the doors. My voice crakel and all you could hear were doors slamming. What wrong mom my little kids ask I didn't answer .The older kids said leave mom alone can't you see she gone to try an drive this car you'll buckle up. The kids lock all the door just like I told them. And to my surprise the oldest girl started praying and it went something like this. Dear God I know that I don't normally talk to you mom said that when I am in trouble to ask you to help me .I don't know what to ask you for really so please keep us together and safe please Jesus thank you. Then she told the kids to sing with her. Jesus love me this I know for the bible tell me so.

When Paulette first imaged this piece out loud, she gave us the bare bones to the extent that everyone was riveted by the situation, when suddenly she stopped and asked: But don't I have to tell you what led up to this point? It was then that we made the decision together that the drama of the opening moment would immediately draw in the reader and then it would be even more effective for her to immediately loop back.

The idea that the first backwards loop should be through the daughter's prayers, which indeed gives us a great deal of information, didn't come to Paulette until she was actually writing. However, without our preliminary work in playing out the elements of backtracking to give information, she might never have arrived there. Now the opening leads us effortlessly into understanding a story to which we were strangers just minutes ago.

I turn the key and it started right away. I was saying in my mind r is reverse the big paddle is the brake. I reach up and pull the shifter until it reach R we back up very slow I didn't know how to drive and that big 9 passage station wagon scared me to death. All at once I hit the brake I know I hit them to hard because the car jerked I pulled

the shifter some more and it reach the little d is this the right d or should it be the big d. I didn't know and didn't have time to ask .I pulled slow out of the drive way. I wasn't a block from the house and every car that came pass flash their headlight at me. I knew that meant My high beams was on. So I pulled over to the side of the road and try to figure out how to turn them off no should luck. I had to turn around back to the house.

Had we not encouraged Paulette to give images of her not knowing how to drive, the small details that follow might never have taken her (and us) back there.

I walk in just as bold as I could be and say how in the hell do I turn off the high beams. He went over to the door and block it, and I became very afraid so much afraid that I could feel the sweat rolling down my arm. He try to sweet talk me. He said you know I love you and I didn't answer. Why you want to hurt me like this I didn't answer he said pull the blinker toward you and they will cut off but in my mind I thought the same reason why you always want to hurt me. He kept talking I thought that I was going to be hit for sure. All at once he stop talking step away from the door with a big smile and said you're not going any where it raining and you don't even like to ride in the rain so you sure don't want to try and drive in the rain. Tell the kids to come in side your not going any where. Then I answer him and said ok. I walk very slowly out the front door went to the car hopped in it and started it up and drive away. There was no going back now not if I waiting to keep on breathing. I sat at the police station. Cry on the inside Lord what do I do now.³

³ Paulette Sellers' piece appears in full in *Affila, Journal of Women and Social Work*, Volume 19, Number 4, with all of the original phrasing kept intact and only the spelling corrected. Rukhsana Ayyub's piece appears in a slightly edited version. I will never forget the joy on Paulette's face as she rocked back and forth in our rocker, with the magazine on her lap, saying over and over, "I'm published. I'm published."

Activism as the Impulse/Taking the Reader There as the Tool

Writing, at its best, can open the eyes of the unconverted; it can change people's lives. To work on formulating stories of oppression, hope, and triumph; and to learn with one another the tools to transform what is hidden into something that can be heard, is an experience like no other.

However, the production of writing that can truly be heard by another doesn't happen by magic. Had our Herstory group been less diverse, had the samples been more similar in content, perhaps we wouldn't have been able to develop tools that went from structure to structure, showing each writer how to build empathy and a desire to enter.

In closing, I would like to return to the words of Rukhsana, who, as one of the founders of the Committee for Domestic Harmony, dedicated to helping Islamic women fight domestic violence, had comfortably spoken in front of local as well as international gatherings.

None of these experiences can compare to the first time I read my work in public. Standing in a packed little bookstore, I read about my mother growing up under the veil and behind high walls in Pakistan. I read about the lives of these women whose names were not allowed to be spoken outside the walls of their homes. I was not only climbing walls myself but I was bringing with me generations of women before me. It was one most exhilarating as well as scary experience. By the time I got home from the reading I had developed severe throat pain and could not speak for a few days.

As we devise tools to help those who have been silenced to effectively speak, we must remember that the passage from one state to another isn't easy, that when we assist someone in crossing a border we ourselves haven't experienced, we must be careful to go slowly, easily enough, so that writers and listener/readers can be in harmony. Only then will the barriers that keep us apart begin to dissolve.

ATTENDING TO *HU'HUK*: LESSONS FOR A TEACHER elizabeth park

***Feign* was the word; it began a journey that took me from a New Jersey middle school classroom to the Sonoran Desert and back again.** On the way, I learned valuable lessons about the ways in which social class and political power can play out over a succession of centuries. I learned to look into the past for guidance, not only to the history of nations, but also to the history of my own family. These lessons all led me to a deeper understanding of the potential power embedded in a pedagogy that seeks to build on student strengths.

It started with an eighth-grade literature class and a vocabulary lesson. It was my second year of teaching, and I was leaning heavily on the literature anthology that is standard issue in our public school classrooms. Each short story, play, or non-fiction article is accompanied by a series of exercises, and a list of words the publishers have determined to be unfamiliar to U.S. eighth graders. Teachers across the country faithfully teach these vocabulary words and their definitions.

I'd developed a process for approaching these semantic laundry lists, and it included more than definitions and the obligatory "use-the-word-in-a-sentence" instructions. Because 75% of the students in my school speak Spanish at home, I also included a translation exercise, offering the Spanish synonyms for the words in question. I'd also begun talking to students about the family history of English, and how it has relatives not only in the Germanic language family, but also in the Romance family. My goal, of course, was to bring English closer to many of my students. I fervently hoped this kind of knowledge would scaffold learning, helping my students build bridges between their two languages, in order to use each as a lever to reach greater academic achievement.

Feign was one of those vocabulary words. I don't remember the story that contained it, but ever since, I have felt the impact of this one word and what it taught me about my students and about my own misconceptions.

I puzzled over how to teach *feign*. It's a pretty highfalutin' kind of word, and I was distracted from the real task by the trappings with which we've invested

feign. As I pondered how to make the word real for my students, an unbidden fantasy played out in my mind. In this daydream, one of my eighth-grade boys had gone to the principal to make a confession. “Yo, Mr. B,” he said, imitating the discourse rhythms of one of the more popular hip hop singers, “I really was the one that wrote on the wall in the boys’ room, but when you asked me the first time, I feigned innocence.” I shook my head rapidly to rid myself of *that* image.

Ultimately, I decided to continue the format I’d been using, and when I looked up *feign* in my English-Spanish dictionary, I found *fingir*. The words were remarkably similar, even down to the “g,” no longer silent, but aspirated like a whisper. I tried it on the class, and every student knew *fingir*, and knowing *fingir* made it easier for them to add *feign* to their vocabularies. The connection drawn by that simple translation exercise made *feign* theirs to keep and to use.

I unpacked that experience for weeks, castigating myself for my assumptions. Whether they are official ESL students or not, my students speak Spanish. Spanish is very closely related to French, and *feign* came into English from French. After all, I knew that English was the daughter of an Anglo-Saxon father and a French mother. I knew that French was the sister of Spanish. And I knew that the French of the Norman conquerors was the language of the aristocracy, and that the Latinate vocabulary it has bequeathed to modern English retains an aura of privilege and sophistication. Why on earth would I assume that an English word that was the obvious legacy of a Norman overlord would be inaccessible to young people who spoke a language as closely connected to the aristocratic French tongue as is Spanish?

This led me to stop assuming that I, or a textbook mega-publisher, could presume to know my students’ vocabulary needs. I now teach English as a Second Language, and I still don’t assume. For several years, I’ve conducted a sustained silent reading program for my eighth-grade English Language Learners. A component of the program is vocabulary. I don’t, however, try to take control any longer. I let the students tell me what they don’t understand. Then we talk about it. I’ve learned that they have many strengths to call on in decoding English vocabulary, and that one of them is the powerful prior knowledge they have of words with Latin roots. And I found that I learned more, and was a better

teacher, when I let my students show me where their strengths were, and let them ask for help when they needed it.

It's not always easy, however, for students who are accustomed to traditional pedagogical methods to accept a teacher whose methods are "different." Esteban was in both my ESL reading class and my ESL writing class, and he challenged me repeatedly at the beginning of the year.

"Why don't you ask us to write book reports?"

"Why don't you give us tests on the books?"

"Why aren't we all reading the same book?"

"Why aren't we reading out loud?"

There was anger behind his questions, but there was something much deeper, far beneath the anger. Esteban was a young man who took his studies extremely seriously. His grades were very good. He and his two brothers had come to the U.S. with their mother, a widow, only the year before. As I got to know him better, I learned that he and his brothers were determined to do as well as they could in school so that they could get high-paying jobs and relieve their mother of the burdens she had shouldered in order to raise them. His anger, it seemed, came from a suspicion that silent reading wasn't really serious study, and therefore wouldn't help him reach that goal.

I always answered his questions as honestly as I could. One day I told him that I'd read that the "average" U.S. student adds 3,000 new words a year to his vocabulary (Gleason, p. 409), and that by age seventeen, an English-speaking student in this country could have a vocabulary as large as 80,000 words (Wong-Fillmore and Snow, p. 18). The best way I knew for him to learn as many new words as he could was to read, and read, and read some more. With silent reading, he could progress at his own pace (which was astonishingly rapid) and he could take part in the class discussions about words, phrases, and their meaning. He thought about it for a minute, and then nodded. I didn't say this, but perhaps should have: that with this kind of self-paced learning, he could build on his strengths in ways that were best for him. Soon he was advocating sustained silent

reading more powerfully to his peers than ever I could. He's now a high school junior, and I saw him the other day. He told me he is still reading as much as he can, and he's still on track to meet his goal. His mother must be very proud of him. I certainly am.

Having come to the realization that I could learn far more about teaching—and learning—if I stopped trying to force-fit classroom interactions into the shape I thought they should assume, and if I stopped talking long enough to listen, I began to use this lens as a way to look at far more than vocabulary.

I kept track of the words my students asked about. I wanted to learn as much as I could from what they had to say. It was fascinating, and I pored over the lists, looking for what the aggregate of their vocabulary questions could tell me. They told me something that was at once startling and also so obvious that I wondered why I hadn't realized it earlier.

The words my students needed to know about were almost never the multi-syllabic words that many of us, as teachers, think they don't understand. Their questions were about the shorter words that we teachers assume will be part of the vocabulary a student brings with her to school. After all, don't children take *naps*, and don't they learn to *nod* their heads to signify agreement, and *shake* them to disagree, and don't we caution them not to *slip* or *slide* on the *ice*? Aren't those the easy words?

They are, however, far from easy for my Spanish-speaking English Language Learners. My students will stumble over the word *sleepwalker* while they take *somnambulist* in their stride. They understand *injure*, but *hurt* is out of their reach. *Aspire* is easy for them, but *hope* is not. *Somnambulo*, *injuriar*, and *aspirar* are the Spanish cognates for *somnambulist*, *injure*, and *aspire*. In short, the English vocabulary that we've inherited from French and Latin is easily accessible to them, and the nursery and kindergarten words that are the simple vocabulary of the Saxon peasants, are not.

Coming to this conclusion was a trip that required acknowledging the dual vocabulary of English. It's almost a genetic model, with one meaning expressed by both a short word donated from the Anglo-Saxon father and a longer, more flowing word that's the gift of the French mother. Having thought this through, and

having begun to comprehend the implications for teaching English vocabulary to Spanish-speaking students, I felt I needed help. I wanted to validate my thinking about what was “easy” vocabulary for my students and what was not. At a conference of the Arizona Reading Association, I spoke with a number of educators, all of whom had an interest in English language learning, and many of whom spoke Spanish as their first language. Those whose linguistic heritage was Spanish all expressed a deep resonance when I described my observations. What I had observed was what they had lived.

The field of English language learning is as old as English and as new as the child who followed her parents this morning as they made their way through U.S. Immigration at Kennedy Airport. There are myriad angles of vision to use in developing an ELL classroom practice, and as I became familiar with the work of a range of theorists, I found I longed to listen to the voices of those who have been ELLs. I sought the same kind of authenticity that I’d found with those vocabulary discussions. I felt that I should weave the voices of those who are learning English with the voices of those who have already learned the language.

While visiting my daughter when she was a student at the University of Arizona, I met a group of educators who had learned English as a second language; they had been students in Indian Boarding Schools. Members of the Tohono O’odham Nation, they are teachers in the public school system that serves their nation’s reservation. Conversations with them led me to plan an ethnographic inquiry into what I consider a profound resource for better understanding how a second language is learned. The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation generously provided funding for the fieldwork, and the Education Committee of the Tohono O’odham Nation graciously granted access to the community’s intellectual property. Lillian Fayuant, kindergarten teacher at Indian Oasis Primary School in Sells, AZ, the reservation capital, offered time and help and gave both freely, even when it seemed that our project threatened to consume almost all of her summer vacation. She was guide and mentor, opening her encyclopedic knowledge of her community and its language to me.

The Indian Boarding School experiment has been studied for a number of purposes, including better understandings of social injustice and inequity of

access. These pedagogical prisons operated in force from the 1870's well into the middle of the twentieth century. They were intended to be a final assault in the Indian Wars the U.S. Government had waged against indigenous people in its quest for land and power. The architect of this school system was Colonel Henry Pratt, who expressed his vision by saying “. . . all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man” (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4929/>). Pratt, and his successors, sought to fulfill this purpose by wrenching Indian children away from their parents, transporting the children as far from home as possible, and forbidding the use of their tribal languages. Punishments were severe, and hard labor was exacted in exchange for the gift of a “civilized” education. Rations were meager, and often comprised food the children had never seen or tasted before. Many children died from malnutrition and from disease, as the cemetery at Carlisle Indian School in Carlisle, PA, attests.

As I prepared myself for conversations with tribal elders, I read as much material as I could find about Indian Boarding Schools. If ever there was a lesson in how not to teach a second language, I found it in the accounts I uncovered. The conversations Lillian and I had with elders from her community often focused on how, as children, they had learned English in boarding schools. Those conversations about ESL pedagogy became the foundation for my master's thesis. But because the elders, by virtue of their professions or their revered positions within their community, are educators the conversations also turned on philosophies of teaching. They often explored the nature of learning, and the role played by the relationship between teacher and learner.

Verna Enos is the tribal language and culture teacher at the reservation's primary school. In the context of our discussion, she spoke about the factors that can engage and excite a child about learning, and the factors that can prevent that eagerness from blossoming. She expressed the opinion that “until you honor who we are” (Park, p. 15), the latter will occur far more frequently than the former. As I reflected on this, I came to feel that her wisdom is applicable to any child who is schooled in ways and methods that are foreign to her home culture. Verna Enos led me to the question: “How can I best honor my students?”

Sometimes it's difficult to unwrap layers of defensiveness and the multiple strata of adolescent behavior to find that nugget of gold to honor.

Enrique challenged me daily with shrugs, rolled eyes, and muttered comments I couldn't understand and probably didn't want to. He avoided work, skipped class, and paraded any sort of disciplinary measure as a badge of honor. I came close to giving up on him.

One day he came to class with his arm in a cast. I'd planned a writing assignment for the day, one that was based on the five-sentence paragraph structure that is often taught as a foundation for expository writing. With a smirk, Enrique pointed to his cast and said he couldn't write. I told him he could dictate to me and I would write. For most of the period, he and I worked together as I asked him for a topic sentence, and then for supporting sentences, and finally for a concluding sentence. He relaxed, shook off the veneer of surliness, and talked his way through a really solid paragraph.

I was stunned and intrigued. We worked together like that a number of times before his cast came off, and I learned that although he had come to the U.S. a year and a half earlier with his mother, they were no longer together. Rather, he was living with his grandmother because his mother had remarried. Her new husband was a member of an infamous gang, and she had moved to the Bronx to be with him. Enrique's grandmother had persuaded her daughter that the children (Enrique and his little sister) would be better off away from the city, living with her.

Just knowing his story helped me work more successfully with Enrique, because I could honor the child who had been uprooted and then abandoned. Believing in him happened a couple of months after the cast was removed. I came across him in town one Saturday; by that time we were on very cordial terms. He was carrying his little sister, a four-year-old. He explained they had walked a lot that day and she was tired. The tenderness with which he held her, the affection that modulated his voice as he spoke to her, and the look of absolute trust in her eyes struck me profoundly. What I saw was family responsibility assumed gladly, and the ability to give and accept love in a way that was mature far beyond his years. I believe in him now. Now I respect him deeply. I honor him very deeply.

Frances Manuel is ninety-four years old, and has spent her life preserving the Tohono O’odham culture and language, and doing what she can to see that the younger members of the community are aware of, and value, their heritage. (Manuel and Neff. 2001.) Preserving their cultural heritage is extremely important to the Tohono O’odham. They are a people who are perhaps unique in this country. Although their tribal lands have shrunk because of government encroachment, the land they are still allowed to claim has belonged to their ancestors for at least 8,000 years (Nabhan, 1982, p. 103). Their land is the Sonoran Desert, harsh terrain where months of drought are rarely broken, and then only by brief spasms of torrential rains. Their cultural treasures contribute to their survival in this hostile region, and include ancient and sophisticated methods of run-off farming that have made their continued desert existence possible (Nabhan, pp. 124-125).

Addressing how important the past is to her people, Frances Manuel explained the word *hu’huk* to me. “My grandfather said that if you don’t learn in the time, and you go on and jump back, then you know what you don’t know, and then you find out what you never learned.” She said that *hu’huk* means what we lose when we lose a culture. “That’s what they call it when an old man dies. They put him in the ground. Everything now is buried, put in and put on top ...and so they call [it] *hu’huk*. That’s what they say, *hu’huk*, a word that says he’s going to be buried and then we’ll be ...looking for it, and we can’t find it” (Park, p. 13). Later, I asked Lillian for further clarification on this one word that expressed such a wealth of cultural consciousness. She said “If you don’t talk to your elders and learn what they have to pass on, *hu’huk* means ‘it’s all gone’” (Park, p. 13).

As I pondered the concept of *hu’huk*, I began to think more and more of the history of my own family and the role teaching has played in it. Of the five cousins who comprise my generation, there are four teachers. Both my paternal grandparents were teachers; in fact they met when my grandmother was my grandfather’s student, and married some years later. The family mythology is replete with legends of teaching adventures, but it was my Aunt Hettie’s teaching philosophy that came to mind most frequently and most clearly as I recalled the words of Frances Manuel.

Having celebrated her ninety-ninth birthday in 2004, Aunt Hettie is the

oldest of the living teachers in the family. She says, “You can’t teach a child unless you love him, and you can find something to love in every child.”

For his painful experience of life, I honored Enrique. But it was seeing how he took care of his little sister that revealed that nugget of gold that was Aunt Hettie’s “something.”

The word “love,” in English, says many things. It can mean the emotional connection between family members or lovers, but it can also mean the emotional bond between people who share experiences less intimate, but still deeply meaningful.

Having attended to *bu’buk*, as Frances Manuel adjured, I found myself thinking that Verna’s “honor,” and Aunt Hettie’s “love” were somehow related. I followed this course of thought through a number of permutations. Perhaps they weren’t synonyms. Perhaps the question was a matter of different degrees, in terms of the intensity of the emotion? Or the difference between a relationship of individuals and a relationship of communities? As I represent the teaching community, am I bound to my students as they represent the community of learners? I found that “love” and “believe” are etymological relatives, kindred through a common Old English root (Partridge, p 343). Here is another legacy from the past, another way to be mindful of *bu’buk*, offering a new thread to the web of meaning. I felt it indicated that my primary focus as a teacher should be to believe in my students and to treasure their abilities.

Andrea was a quiet, fragile-looking girl, an eighth grader who was always pleasant, always polite. From that perspective, she was a joy to have in class. I was deeply troubled, however, by her academic progress. She seemed disengaged, totally uninterested. Conversations with her, during which I tried to probe for footholds that would help her gain purchase as she scaled the wall of academics, proved fruitless.

One day I stopped to chat with the art teacher as he mounted a display of student work. The elegant composition and bright colors of one piece caught my eye. I commented that the work was extremely sophisticated for a middle schooler. He said, “She’s one of your students, Andrea, and she’s very talented.” And there, in Andrea’s artistic strength, I was sure lay the key to her academic progress.

In ESL science class, we were about to launch an inquiry into the periodic table. As I prepared to teach it, I found I was often as intrigued by the visual pattern as by the data. Here, perhaps, was an opportunity for Andrea. We could create a banner of the periodic table, representing the work of each student. I divided the class into groups according to gases, liquids, and solids, and assigned research parameters for each element. Groups worked collaboratively to create 4" x 6," brightly colored paper cells in which information about each element was recorded. Another student, one whose leadership and organizational abilities were quite strong, oversaw the flow of work. Andrea was the artistic director, making sure that students were using the appropriate colors, that labeling was consistent if not identical, and that each separate cell contributed to the whole in a complementary way. She also took charge when it came to assembling the banner, gluing each element cell against a black background.

The final product was a striking paper banner that was ten feet wide and six feet high, and from a distance looked rather like an intricately patterned patchwork quilt or a huge granny square afghan. It attracted a tremendous amount of attention: the chair of the Language Department featured it in a presentation to the Board of Education, and a photograph of the students and the banner appeared in the local newspaper.

It was a breakthrough for Andrea. The reinforcement of her strength, and the academic recognition it brought her, as well as the recognition of her peers who had accepted her as a leader, were all extremely important. Perhaps more valuable, though, was that she began to understand science in a new way, through her own lens, a lens that was situated according to her own abilities. As that year unfolded, she and I often talked about how she could use her strengths to better understand the content of all her classes. Having tasted success, she was hungry for more. That hunger led her to want to succeed. Her experience of achievement led her to know that she could.

Danny Lopez is acknowledged as a public spokesperson for the Tohono O'odham, and has talked about his people's heritage, culture, and language in *The New York Times* (Raver. 2000) and on National Public Radio (<http://www.pbs.org/saf/1110/hotline/hlopez.htm>). His primary audience, howev-

er, is his own community, where he is so highly esteemed that whenever I mentioned my ethnographic work to a member of the Tohono O’odham Nation, the inevitable response was, “Did you talk to Danny Lopez?” He advises the youth of his community “not to be like anybody else” (Park, p. 16), but to understand their tribal identity and to develop their personal identities within the communal consciousness.

His message is powerful: like the messages of Verna Enos, Frances Manuel, and Aunt Hettie, it has become part of the fabric I’ve woven as I think about how to be a better teacher. This is fertile territory for questions, which arise in abundance as each new thread contributes to the fabric. Each question evokes answers, and each answer elicits new questions. Many of these questions revolve around retaining, maintaining, and sustaining identity. Doesn’t protecting and nurturing that core of self (Trueba, 1990) provide the center of gravity necessary to vigorous inquiry and broad explorations of new intellectual regions? How can I help my students retain the identity they bring with them to this country, and how do I help them safeguard their knowledge and understanding of who they are as they continue the path of development in their new home? What can I do to help prevent the tragedies that occur all too often when self is denied, when knowledge is undervalued, when integrity is ignored?

Here is one answer. It is not the only answer, I’m sure. If I could spend months talking with the elders who shared their wisdom with me, I might have other answers. If I could spend years, I might understand a dozen more. This is my first answer, but it isn’t even mine. It is theirs, the Tohono O’odham elders, and my Aunt Hettie’s.

Honoring an ability cannot stop at differentiating classroom practice. Believing in someone cannot stop at differentiation, either. The process of differentiation is a beginning, one in which the teacher offers students different points of entry into content area knowledge in order to provide learning opportunities that are congruent with students’ strengths and learning styles. However, beyond differentiation lies the application of methodology that helps students learn to differentiate for themselves. They must be able to approach any new learning on their own and without the scaffolding that comes from another person. They must

be able to approach it secure in the knowledge that they can use their own strengths and identities to erect a unique scaffolding which will make learning accessible to them. They must formulate their own questions, to which we, their teachers, must listen intently. And then, if we have given them the right tools, we will be able to respond with the best of all answers, for they will be the students' answers.

There is an irony in the story of a journey that started with *feign*, a word that expresses the inauthentic, and ended with a deeper understanding of how to recognize the authentic core of who my students are in order to honor them and to become a better teacher. In some ways, I feel the journey took me to a point exactly opposite of where I started; in other ways, it seems I've come full circle, and that's certainly an irony as well. Just as irony in literature is a device for uncovering greater truths, perhaps in the teaching journey I've taken it was a compass that guided me away and then pointed me home.

I hope that Danny Lopez will smile and nod when he learns the path I've taken, and that it has led me to seek voices that arise from my students' personal and cultural identities. I hope Frances Manuel will look with tolerance on the way in which *hu'buk* has become part of my personal lexicon. I hope that Verna Enos and Lillian Fayuant will understand and accept the ways in which I've used a tenet from the Tohono O'odham culture to help me make sense of my own. And I hope my Aunt Hettie will never stop finding things to love in all of us who are her students.

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