Participatory Education as a Critical Framework for an Immigrant Women’s ESL Class

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In 1996 and 1997 I worked as a volunteer ESL teacher at a community center in the metropolitan Washington, DC, area that provided legal and employment services, job training, health education, and English language classes to the local Latino community. The center began in the mid-1980s as a small, grassroots operation to link day laborers, mostly male immigrants and refugees from Central America, with jobs in construction, landscaping, restaurants, and light industry. Over the years, it had expanded to include legal services, vocational programs, and English language classes. However, the original focus on the male population was obvious in all of its programs and classes, and women’s participation was minimal. When I taught at the center, classes for women included sewing, word processing, health education, and a small discussion group. The lack of participation by women in all of the programs, including the ESL classes, led me to develop an ESL class for women at the center.

The focus on survival language skills and functional literacy that I observed in the ESL classes at the center provided another impetus for developing the class. Auerbach and Burgess (1985) suggest that materials used to teach survival language skills often “prepare students for subservient social roles and reinforce hierarchical relations within the classroom by precluding the creation of meaning and the development of critical thinking skills” (p. 475). A major goal of my class was to use a problem-posing approach to literacy (based on Freire, 1970b; see also Auerbach, 1992; Wallerstein, 1983) to offer an alternative to the narrow scope of women’s programs. By focusing on issues central to the lives of immigrant Latina women (as defined by the participants themselves), I hoped to provide them with opportunities to think critically about and perhaps to effect change in their lives. In this report, I outline the practical and theoretical elements and describe successful aspects of the class as well as reflect on problematic areas I encountered. I examine two areas where this unique context may provide some insight useful to other critical literacy work: using difference as a catalyst for change and recognizing and supporting multiple perspectives on empowerment.
SUPPORT FOR A WOMEN-ONLY CLASS

Conversations with women at the center showed enthusiastic support for a women’s class. These conversations also revealed some of the barriers faced by immigrant women seeking education. Some women said they felt uncomfortable in the predominantly male classes and were hesitant to participate even if they did attend. Others were unable to attend classes during the day and felt unsafe at the center, which is poorly lit, at night. Involving participants in class scheduling and making the decision to allow them to bring children to the class averted two of these obstacles. Other obstacles, such as safety and respect at the site and the accessibility of education for women, became themes central to language learning and critical reflection.

Literature on women’s literacy (Auerbach, 1989; Carmack, 1992; Cumming, 1992; Hayes, 1989; Klassen & Burnaby, 1993; Young & Padilla, 1990) reveals that gender inequities similar to those I observed at the center exist in many literacy programs. Immigrant women face barriers to education when programs fail to consider their special needs, such as child care, transportation, and scheduling conflicts (Cumming, 1992, p. 1). Women are placed at a further disadvantage in literacy programs that do not consider gender-based differences in acculturation, cognitive development, and learning styles (p. 176). Women’s empowerment may even be minimized in programs designed primarily to promote family literacy because they often place the locus of responsibility for family literacy problems on the woman herself (Auerbach, 1989, cited in Carmack, 1992, p. 180). This responsibility eclipses the importance of the woman’s own education and reinforces her position as subordinate to that of her family (Carmack, 1992, p. 180).

Various forms of male resistance may also serve to impede women’s participation in education. This resistance may take the form of violence or a more subtle deterrent. Rockhill (1990) suggests that when the definition of violence is broadened to include nonphysical forms, “most women have experienced the threat that their having more education, or intelligence, or ideas of their own, poses for the people they know” (p. 90). The changing balance of power that comes with a woman’s ability to express herself in a dominant language may “[provoke] violence in those who feel themselves threatened or silenced by the power of her voice”

1 However, Carmack (1992) describes several programs concerned with meeting the specific literacy needs of women, including Open Book (Safman, 1986, cited in Carmack, 1992), in Brooklyn, New York; East End Literacy of Toronto (Gayfer, 1987, cited in Carmack, 1992); and Wider Opportunities for Women (Kerka, 1989, cited in Carmack, 1992).

The Laubach Literacy Action Women in Literacy/USA Project in Syracuse, New York, provides funding for women’s literacy and ESL literacy projects. The Refugee Women’s Alliance of Seattle is a working example of a women’s literacy project focused on participatory education.
(McMahon, 1986, cited in Rockhill, 1990, p. 90). As literacy educators, we must be aware of the delicate balance of social relations within which literacy lies and of the possible, sometimes negative, outcomes for students when they seek empowerment and change in their lives. We should recognize that male resistance does not have to take the form of overt violence for a woman to censor herself and never allow the possibility of pursuing education (Rockhill, 1990, p. 103). “In situations where violence is part of daily life, and overwork already severe, it is almost impossible to find the energy to move in new directions, especially when these mean further upheaval and violence. As the entry point for further education, literacy may be experienced as a threat for women when it signifies the possibility of a change in status vis-à-vis her husband” (p. 103).

In addition to being aware of the existence and ramifications of violence as a form of resistance to women’s participation in education, we as literacy educators should prepare ourselves, as Horseman (1996) suggests, for disclosures of abuse (both childhood sexual abuse and adult abuse) in women’s lives that may occur within the context of a literacy class. Especially in a class that is geared toward engendering new perspectives on the powers that exist to shape women’s lives and on how women might act to disengage themselves from those powers, both past and present accounts of abuse could surface. For example, for women who have been abused as adults or children and have received strong messages from abusers who want to maintain control over their victims’ independence that they are stupid or unable to learn, the struggle for literacy and personal awareness may bring serious emotional issues to the surface. And as teachers of literacy, we should be aware of the possibilities for abuse in our students’ lives and be prepared to explore options that will offer the support students will need in confronting those possibilities.²

Because of the marginalization immigrant women experience as a function of the gender hierarchy present in their own culture and in U.S. society, and because of their immigrant status, they especially need a safe, nonthreatening environment in which to carry out critical literacy work. As Carmack (1992) states, “given the strength of gender related hierarchy that pervades society, and the relative value of men’s knowledge versus women’s knowledge . . . an atmosphere conducive to true dialogue and perspective transformation would be difficult to achieve in mixed gender groups” (p. 188). Rockhill (1990) poses the question,

² Providing information on bilingual resources for abused and battered women in the community is an important means of support. The knowledge that native language support and resources exist could be a first step in seeking help. Horseman (1996) provides a thorough discussion of how literacy practitioners can be supportive in situations of disclosure of abuse.
“Can we create spaces in the classroom for women to talk together about our hopes and fears, the effects of our actions in directions of greater independence upon family members, the implications of furthering our educations, resistances, as well as support, and strategies for pursuing our dreams?” (p. 109). My hope is that the class environment I describe here to some extent engendered true dialogue and provided an atmosphere of caring and safety that allowed freedom of expression and reflection for the women who participated in it.

APPLYING A CRITICAL APPROACH

In developing the women’s class, I rejected the notion of language as an objective system defined by theorists and transmitted from teacher to student (Pennycook, 1990). I relied instead on Freire’s (1970a) conceptualization of literacy as “an act of knowing, through which a person is able to look critically at the culture which has shaped him [or her], and to move toward reflection and positive action upon his [or her] world” (p. 205). My goal was to create a classroom of “possibility” in which participants could experience the “opening of spaces in the imagination [to] reach beyond where they are” (Greene, 1986, p. 430); that is, spaces where student voices would be louder and stronger than the voice of the teacher and would be free to “express indignation, to break through the opaqueness, [and] to refuse the silences” (p. 441) imposed upon them by the dominant social, cultural, economic, and political forces that forge their lives as minority language speakers. When these voices are strong and articulate, others are forced to listen, and previously subjugated forms of knowledge begin to be legitimated.

My work in the classroom was guided by Freire’s (1970b) participatory education approach to literacy. I used problem posing to encourage students to question social inequities as a basis for language learning (see Wallerstein, 1983). Allowing the students to direct the development of curriculum (Auerbach, 1992), I took the role of a guide, supplying materials and language to explore themes generated by the class, through which we could explore issues central to their lives. Over the course of the class, I reflected on my role as teacher in this process. I questioned the power I wielded in the classroom as a White, middle-class, highly educated native English speaker; the efficacy of my role as one who would empower my students (Shor, 1996); and the nature of that empowerment.

The focus of my class became to create a space in the classroom and, I hoped, beyond in which students could claim the voices in which to articulate their experience. Through that very articulation of experience, participants would examine individually and as a group the causes of oppression and become more aware of the role of oppressive social,
cultural, and political forces in their lives. In telling their stories to me and each other, I hoped they would move toward validating their experience and recognizing where their personal power had led to achievements and successes. A newly formulated consciousness or awareness of their experience, I hoped, would lead to a stronger sense of identity, a realization of personal strength, and an opening of possibilities. Would an awareness of social inequities or a recognition of personal strength lead to empowerment? Would the students acquire the power to step outside the classroom and make their lives better? Would personal awareness lead to collective social change? The answers to these questions remain to be seen.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Procedure**

Throughout the period of involvement with this class, I kept a journal of observations of oral and written interactions from class and of my own reflections. I used a dialogic approach (see Wong, 1994) both in teaching the class and as the basis for information collection. I discussed the data with my university adviser (for a MEd in TESOL program), fellow students in a graduate research methods class, the ESL director at the community center (who was very supportive of the participatory approach even though it was not typical of the center’s ESL program), and the women in my class. These discussions were fundamental to reaching a deeper understanding of the sociocultural phenomena of the classroom and the center.

**The Participants and the Class**

The participants were 17 working-class Latina women from Central and South America and the Caribbean, who lived in the local community. I lived in the immediate area as well, just outside of the Latino neighborhood served by the center, and I speak fluent Spanish, which I learned while living in Ecuador. All of the student participants spoke Spanish, though their levels of Spanish literacy and formal education varied greatly. Despite similarities in their L1 and native culture, the participants’ backgrounds varied with respect to age, marital status, family, social and economic class (both in their native countries and in the United States), employment status, numbers of years in the United States, prior English study, formal education, L1 literacy, and immigrant status. These differences manifested themselves in complex ways in the classroom.

The class met Saturdays for 3 hours from October 1996 through May 1997. It was offered free of charge and based on an open-enrollment...
policy to meet the needs of women whose work schedules changed from week to week or even day to day. Some women, primarily those who were not working, attended every class, whereas others dropped in as their daily lives permitted. I volunteered my time, as did most of the teachers at the center.

In class, the participants generated the themes for discussion; acting as a guide, I posed issues of central concern in a language learning format (Wallerstein, 1983) and provided the language to allow participants to express themselves. Themes identified early in the class included (a) attaining better employment; (b) increasing the ability to communicate with English speakers, especially those who represented the dominant culture; (c) understanding school policies and helping children succeed in school; (d) continuing one’s education; and (e) increasing the ability to negotiate cultural and social norms. Other themes emerged throughout the class, dominated by issues of family, relationships, gender equity, unfair employment practices, lack of opportunities to interact with English speakers, racial prejudices, and discrimination. Negotiating identities across ethnic, racial, and national lines also became central to the learning process.

The work of feminist pedagogy, which advocates a more “complex vision” (Weiler, 1991, p. 455) of liberation pedagogy, beyond Freire’s universal rendering of oppression, helped me understand the many experiences articulated by the participants in my class and navigate the tension, frustration, and hostility that sometimes accompanied our work. By examining the divided experience and varied truths of the oppressed, Weiler suggests, teachers can uncover “the contradictions and tensions within social settings in which overlapping forms of oppression exist” (p. 453). This perspective of “nonsynchrony of oppression” (McCarthy, 1988, cited in Weiler, 1991, p. 453) was particularly relevant to the structure of my class. Women experience multiple realms of oppression and marginalization. They do not always act together to question or fight oppression. The differences inherent in the backgrounds and experiences of the participants and the complexity of the relationships among these women from different countries, religions, and socioeconomic classes manifested themselves in various forms of hierarchy in the classroom. Freire’s vision of universal oppression and the idea that the oppressed “will act collectively to transform the world” (Weiler, 1991, p. 453) when they see themselves in relation to it was seriously challenged. Obvious differences among the participants, escalated by their relationships to me (the power center of the class in many ways, although I did not want this position), led to power struggles, which at times led to new understandings.
DISCUSSION

There were obvious successes in using a critical, participatory approach to literacy with this group of women, including the development of solidarity among participants, an increased sense of identity, the exploration of woman-centered issues, and the emergence of and focus on different learning styles. Throughout the class, the women commented that they felt special being part of the women’s class. New relationships were formed, and women began to see themselves as a community with shared needs and goals and began to rely more on each other for help. For example, the participants began to offer one another rides to class and share child care. They also shared in bringing food and materials to class.

The women in the class favored discussion and storytelling, in which they shared experiences and gave and took advice, over a directed lesson format. They often controlled the flow of the class, many times arguing difficult points in their native language. Because the female participants generated the themes and led the development of curriculum, classes often coalesced around themes that might be considered inappropriate in a mixed-gender group. Women could speak candidly and act freely regarding issues on which their opinions and views differed from or threatened those of their male counterparts. The participants were engaged and often assertive while negotiating serious themes and were comfortable with the use of dialogue as the foundation for the class.

The dominant means of language learning in the class was the promotion and sharing of life journeys. From the first class, women shared aspects of their lives that had brought them to their common geographical ground. I provided pictures, songs, poetry, art, and any other cues I could to generate discussion and reflection on our personal lives. I include myself here because I also told my stories and reflected on how I had come to be where I was. I often promoted discussion of differences in such areas as social class, religious background, and sexual orientation.

One such discussion culminated in comparisons of photographs from magazines depicting women and families in different cultural and class settings. Women who were Hispanic and Black (the backgrounds of the women in the class) in the pictures I chose were shown in low-income, sometimes impoverished settings, whereas White women appeared in dazzling, luxurious backgrounds. In small groups, the students talked about the differences between the pictures and how they felt about them. A discussion of wealth, poverty, class, and privilege ensued. The women expressed envy, dislike, and distrust of the White women in the pictures and a sense that they could never attain what those women had. They expressed sympathy and empathy for the women of color. The

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women invented lively stories to describe the pictures and composed them with help from me and one another. They developed role plays to illustrate and experience these stories.

Issues that arose in class were sometimes delicate and problematic, both for me as a teacher and for the participants. For example, although disclosures of domestic violence never surfaced, some women faced opposition to their participation in the class. In several classes, women discussed ways to assert their desire to attend class without upsetting the balance of power in their homes. In one case, a woman’s husband had told her that the class was interfering with her housework and child-care responsibilities. On the days we had class, she rose at 4:00 or 5:00 a.m. to do the shopping and housework and prepare her family’s meals. She brought her two daughters, ages 9 and 11, to class, and together we provided them with books and school-based work. The daughters also helped take care of, and teach, younger children who came to class with their mothers.

**Difference as a Catalyst for Change**

Interestingly, the successes of this class often coalesced around differences in the backgrounds of the participants. The class’s struggle with these differences often engendered meaningful discussion and activities. Students had different goals in terms of language learning, empowerment, and critical awareness and brought with them varying degrees of formal education and a multitude of life experiences, which created a classroom in which difference was often more obvious than similarity. We used these differences as a basis for exploration and negotiation of hierarchy and inequality. In confronting differences within the class context, we developed tools with which to view ourselves more objectively. For example, we learned to look behind initial, sometimes hostile, reactions to individuals different from ourselves to create strategies for interacting. We learned to think about and express our anger and mistrust constructively. Students practiced their voices. They experimented with thinking and exploring their feelings about issues they had simply reacted to in the past. In articulating their experience verbally, they legitimated themselves, strengthening their identities, which were sometimes resonant and sometimes dissonant with those of others in the class.

By focusing on life journeys and personal histories, we legitimated the experience and prior knowledge each student brought with her into the classroom and used these to help define the changes women wanted to make outside the classroom, for example, completing a General Education Diploma, going to college, passing the citizenship test, and helping children succeed in school.
Through role plays (e.g., a mock job interview or confrontation with a coworker), storytelling, and discussion of women’s lives, we created fertile ground for understanding, instruction, and change. An excellent starting point was each woman’s story of coming to the United States. One young woman from Guatemala, with very light skin and 2 years of college in her country, was treated coldly in the class until she told her harrowing story of illegally crossing the U.S. border. Perhaps sensing a shared experience, a group of Salvadoran women in the class, about 10 years her senior, took her under their wing and introduced her to their network of connections in the community. With their help, she got a job as a nanny and housekeeper. Further discussions revealed that she had higher expectations for work, but she was glad to be secure for the present.

At times, solidarity was achieved with great difficulty. The women in the class had strong emotions and sometimes narrow views of one another. They were sometimes supportive and cooperative, and at other times condescending and silencing. Competition arose based on age, national origin, differences in the use of Spanish, and educational background. For example, when a new member from Peru, who was literate in and spoke a refined form of Spanish and a bit of English, joined the group, some members of the class were outraged. “Why is she here?” they questioned in Spanish. “¡Ya sabe!” (She already knows!).

When faced with the cultural differences that created distance and hostility between group members or between students and myself, I tried to follow and model Noddings’ (1986) idea that relationships based in caring and fidelity strengthen the dynamic between teacher and student. I came to feel that this was a very natural way for women to react to one another, because there was often a foundation of support, caring, and understanding beneath the other emotions in the class. Out of the class’s struggles emerged the qualities of strength, leadership, nurturing and caring, and solidarity.

**Empowerment**

Empowerment, one of the primary goals of a participatory education framework, was a central problem in the class. Just as a universal rendering of the concept of oppression obscures the experience of individuals, a blanket definition of empowerment limits the success of participatory education. I reflected on various aspects of empowerment in an attempt to arrive at a more meaningful and complex rendering of

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3 Klassen and Burnaby (1993) note that immigrants in Canada viewed a low level of Spanish language literacy as a deterrent to progress in learning English and as the mark of a second-class citizen within the ethnic community.
the concept. Then I asked, for example, Empowerment for whom? Who is empowering whom? What does my definition of empowerment have to offer the participants of the class? How do the participants view themselves in terms of having power or not having power? Is empowerment important to participants in a collective sense, or are they concerned with specific, more immediate power struggles in their lives?

These questions arose out of what appeared to be cultural differences with reference to notions of power. I identified with a goal of empowerment, which I defined loosely as the means by which or the extent to which one is in control of one’s own existence, or one’s ability to make decisions and carry out actions independent of the coercion of others. For me, this power to act was intricately woven into the fabric and politics of language (and I wanted my students to see this and act on it). It was also directly linked to the collective empowerment of women through the feminist movement. I could see empowerment on a political level. I was aware that women could have access to power, and I consciously participated in the struggle to develop power for women. I had had a privileged upbringing that stressed individual rights to power, at least on a philosophical level.

How did the student participants define empowerment? Many of the women in my class came from societies in which equal access to power is neither an ideological norm nor the providence of the majority. This, in itself, is often the reason why they chose, or were forced, to leave their country of origin. For these individuals, relationships of power can be difficult to question.

In the classroom, the participants often remained silent when empowerment was discussed in terms of relationships of power on the societal level. When empowerment was put in a personal context, the dialogue was much richer. Although they did not always define it as such, the women in the class had high levels of personal empowerment. They were heads of households, often responsible for several children and an extended family. They had left difficult situations behind and had gotten themselves, often alone, to a new country. They provided stability in the form of wages, food, shelter, clothing, and transportation for their families. They belonged to church groups and were involved in community work. They supported their children in school by helping with homework, meeting with teachers, and working through the paperwork of the school systems, often in a language unfamiliar to them. They sought education to better themselves, learning English in order to better navigate their new, sometimes hostile, cultural environment. They had experienced the relations of power and social interactions of the English-speaking culture, and they were claiming the right to speak outside the classroom. This reflects a high level of investment in the
target culture (Peirce, 1995) and a certain ability to attain the right to speak.

By telling their stories, the women in the class drew strength from their personal victories and, as the class progressed, talked more about the oppressive cultural and social forces they confronted. They also listened to my stories and expressed solidarity where difference had previously been dominant. The class began to serve as a forum for questioning the power structures that dominated our lives. Participants shared stories of discrimination, heavy demands made by employers, low wages in return for hard work, and frustration with not being able to communicate with employers and teachers. They expressed concern that English speakers sometimes took advantage of them because of their lack of understanding of the language, and they felt limited in their participation in the English-speaking community that surrounded them, noting that they felt closed out and had few opportunities for interaction. Moreover, they began to feel that learning English offered a way to increase their power in many of the situations above. I, in turn, realized that in teaching English it is necessary to teach language that relates to the lives of the participants and that helps them strengthen their concepts of self and community and confront the oppressive forces in their lives.

CONCLUSION

Giroux (1988) reflected that although literacy may not be emancipatory in itself, it is “the precondition for engaging in struggles around relations of meaning and power” (cited in Pennycook, 1990, p. 309). The goal of the participatory education in this class was to work in the direction of empowerment through language learning. Yet I found that my own political view of empowerment sometimes thwarted our efforts. When we focused on the articulation of the participants’ experiences and personal achievements, we validated the power they had to make changes in their lives.

Validation was a first step. Personal awareness and legitimation are borne out in small changes in individual lives: asserting oneself, over the wishes of a spouse, to go to class; studying for the citizenship exam; getting a job; studying English; using the library. I believe that this class provided a safe space for the growth of a small, nurturing, and supportive community, where a dialogic process allowed previously silenced individuals to articulate their personal experience, unmasking the link between the personal and the political. It created a secure space where people could question, experience and talk about difference, and consider new possibilities.
Bee (1993) asserts the "necessity to begin with students' own lives as a backdrop against which to study and analyze the larger issues concerning the social and the political" (p. 111). This resonates with my own realization that, for the women with whom I shared this experience—and probably for myself as a woman as well—the personal is the political. This realization is the first step toward collective social change: individual women recognizing their personal worth and beginning to wrestle with the social norms that have repressed them, small groups of women struggling to understand themselves and each other when difference looms more obvious than similarity.

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**Immigrant Rights, Curriculum Development, and ESL Teacher Education**

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In a conversation about literacy in the United States, Freire (Freire & Macedo, 1987) spoke about his own need to keep lessening the gap between his political/pedagogical beliefs, or discourse, and what he does as a teacher, his practice. “Narrowing the distance between discourse and practice,” he says, “is what I call coherence” (p. 135). Coherence as defined by Freire was a goal of the participatory teacher education project outlined in this report. In it, teachers and teacher educators tried to articulate their theories and align them with practice while collaboratively developing a textbook. Coherence became an overarching goal, along with improving the quality of ESL instruction in Chicago’s community-based organizations (CBOs) and creating an environment in which teachers could create “the critical capacity to consider and participate in the direction and dreams of education” (p. 139).

In this report I describe the model of participatory ESL teacher education that evolved through this work. I use the term model cautiously, as it implies replication of techniques in other circumstances, which is problematic for a critical ethnography. Rather than explain techniques that would yield the same results in any circumstance, I describe an