Chapter 16

“Y’all Laggin’!”: Exploring the Intersection of Academic and Youth Language Practices through Digital Tools

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ABSTRACT

This chapter details a collaborative project between a class of preservice teachers and a class of tenth grade high school students. Separated by thousands of miles, the two classes engaged through online communication including the use of chatrooms, Youtube videos, and video conferencing. Addressing issues of power within the urban high school, this study encouraged youth voice to dictate and advocate for the needs of students. At the same time, the online relationships fostered in this study allowed preservice teachers to help mentor and support students learning. Various challenges including structural inequities in the public high school and relational miscommunications between both groups illustrated ways researchers must work to address the context of digital technology for literacy-based learning. This study highlights how digital technology can help support youth voice and guide teacher education models.

INTRODUCTION

Youth culture often poses a riddle that educators struggle to unravel. This can become most apparent when one looks at language practices. After years of studying and working with content, pedagogy, and curriculum, it can be easy for teachers to forget that they, too, once engaged in language practices heavily influenced by the media, their cultural backgrounds, and their quest to differentiate themselves from the generation that came before them. When working with students who come from backgrounds very different than their own, this riddle can become even more complex.
for teachers. And for preservice teachers who are attempting to balance what they are learning in their teacher education courses with what they are seeing in their field experiences, the riddle can become unsolvable, particularly since most preservice teachers find themselves studying their craft in classrooms that look very similar to the ones they experienced growing up (Sleeter, 2001).

This chapter explores how digital technology can help guide literacy instruction, while at the same time meet the challenges of preparing a predominantly white teaching force to work effectively with students of color. As King, Hollins, & Hayman (1997) argue, addressing diversity cannot be an add-on course or unit within an existing course. We explore how technology helps the primarily white, female, middle class teaching force (Zeichner, et al., 1998) move beyond the limited scope that traditional clinical placements often provide. Using digital tools like Skype, online chatrooms, and video production, we highlight the intersection of academic literacy instruction, cultural awareness, and 21st century digital tools. Promoting literacy practices via technology, we expand the number of youth of color that white preservice teachers typically interact with in an effort to counter the mistaken belief that there are few differences in cultures (Seidl, 2007). The result is a study that places digital tools at the helm of guiding culturally responsive teaching practices (Gay, 2000) for a class of preservice teachers in central Illinois. It also demonstrates how a group of 10th grade urban youth in South Central Los Angeles adopted the role of experts in youth literacy practices, teaching these future educators more about the craft of teaching.

During the fall 2011 semester, 35 high school sophomores took on the role of teacher, providing 16 preservice teachers with a glimpse into their lives. They shared social and cultural practices, often cloaked in different language practices, that contrasted greatly with the practices of the students they worked with in their local field experiences. While these high school students were teaching the college students about their lives, they were also learning how to hone their own academic literacy skills, providing them with opportunities to explore the role of language in different contexts. Together, the two groups entered a reciprocal relationship that allowed them to blur the lines between teacher and students, demonstrating the potential of sharing power in the classroom.

**BACKGROUND**

**Language and Power in Schools**

Much has been written about issues of language and schooling, with a particular emphasis on the debates between monolingualism and bilingualism. Yet, as Macedo (2000) points out, the literature and discussions neglect to address the very real issue of the role language plays in shaping human realities. “That is, they ignore the way language may either confirm or deny the life histories and experiences of the people who use it” (Macedo, 2000, p. 21). While Macedo is referring to the issues surrounding students who speak English as a second language, we argue that students in urban settings face similar struggles whether they speak English or not. That is, for the students in our study who speak a language peppered with non-academic English, Spanish, and youth slang, they often face educational mandates that stifle the very languages that represent who they are.

With the increasing diversification of schools, particularly in urban settings, the role of academic language and its importance for succeeding in school has become a popular topic of discussion. This emphasis has impacted educational policy that can create classrooms that “reproduce social inequalities linked to racism, sexism, class discrimination and ethnocentrism” (Morgan, 2000, p. 8). Bourdieu (1977) maintains that this stems from the fact that dominant class imposes their language practices on the minority class to perpetuate their economic authority and cultural
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