

“Plurilinguals in Motion”: Engaging Diverse Communities?

Meilan P. Ehlert and Leanne Boschman¹

Introduction

The purpose of our panel discussion is to call for a deeper understanding of the complexity and multiplicity concerning issues related to diversity in our society, especially in today’s dynamic educational context. We consider that diversity is an essential aspect in educational contexts, especially in relation to the diversity of the learners and their learning environment, as well as to the diversity of practitioners (including teachers and administrators) and their working environments.

From this perspective, this presentation aims to explore what we mean by diversity, and how we engage diverse communities, particularly in educational institutions across today’s rapidly globalizing world. As for our understanding of diversity, we are initially drawing from Simon Fraser University’s (SFU) Strategic Vision Background (www.sfu.ca) which includes diversity as one of its essential underlying principles. The principles highlight the importance of “foster[ing] a culture of inclusion and mutual respect, celebrating the diversity and multi-ethnic character reflected amongst its students, staff, faculty [schools], and our society” (SFU, Strategic Vision, 2014). From such an understanding of diversity as a starting point, we attempt to connect the East and West through our perspective backgrounds.

A central question of concern to us is the ways in which practitioners from various educational backgrounds engage diverse communities in their practice. From this overarching question come three more specific questions that draw from our respective research interests:

- In what ways are language, culture, and literacy practices connected?
- What can an understanding of the lives of plurilingual individuals, both learners and practitioners, contribute to a discussion of diversity?
- What do Critical Literacies and Multiliteracies contribute to the discussion of co-existence?

We seek to examine the complex interplay between languages, cultures, and literacies in today’s dynamic educational contexts in order to address these questions.

¹ Both Meilan P. Ehlert (meilane@sfu.ca) and Leanne Boschman (leanneb@sfu.ca) are PhD Candidates of Languages, Cultures and Literacies program in the Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University, B.C., Canada. This article is based on their introduction (as Co-organizers and Moderators) to their panel presentation at the annual Faculty conference, *Learning Together (2014): “in-difference: Conflict and Diversity,”* on May 9, 2014, Simon Fraser University. (<http://www.educ.sfu.ca/learningtogether/>)

Activating Full Assets of “Plurilinguals in Motion”

Fostering a culture of inclusion and mutual respect is a significant aspect that needs to be focused on in an educational context supporting diversity. This includes a focus on the plurality in and out of the classroom context in a formal educational system. We consider that the underlying principle of *diversity* has close relevance to the European conceptualization of “plurilingualism” (Council of Europe, 2001)², especially among Francophone sociolinguists and didacticians. In particular, it is in terms of both concepts that we need to focus on the importance of fostering a culture of inclusion and mutual respect. What’s more, plurilingualism focuses on the “plurilingual and pluricultural competence” (Coste, Moore & Zarate, 2009) and strategic use of repertoires and agency in multiple linguistic resources, an essential tool for the empowerment of individuals with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The concept of Plurilingual and Pluricultural Competence (PPC) highlights the importance of acknowledging the full feature of a plurilingual individual, such as understanding the partial competence of students from diverse linguistic and cultural background. Conceptualisation of PPC highly affirms plurilingual individuals’ talent in strategic use of multiple linguistic resources from their dynamic repertoire in different time and space. In this sense, plurilingualism can be considered as a specific dimension under the big picture of diversity.

From this perspective, Ehlert (2013) proposed the notion of *Plurilinguals in Motion* (PIM) as an initiative to empower individuals with multilingual and multicultural backgrounds (as we call “plurilinguals” here) who are going through various ongoing transitions from one stage to another. By highlighting the significance of understanding plurilingualism, as well as the nature of plurilingual and pluricultural competence of a plurilingual speaker, PIM emphasizes importance of *not only* promoting, *but also* activating and capitalizing on a plurilingual speaker’s dynamic repertoires and agency in multiple linguistic and cultural resources. In this initiative, all individuals with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds are encouraged to strategically appropriate multiple (linguistic and cultural) resources, so that they can better survive and thrive in the constantly changing conditions in society. By focusing on the *Motion*, PIM focuses on individuals in various transitions of mobility inclusive of globalization and internationalization. Such mobility includes, but is not limited to physical and virtual, linguistic and cultural movement between multiple spaces. These plurilinguals include “Plurilingual Youth in Motion” (Ehlert & Moore, 2014-in press), such as six multilingual *ChaoXianZu* [ethnic Korean Chinese] teenage students in Beijing as described by Ehlert and Moore, who are constantly navigating and reconfiguring the “Multi” in their languages and identities.

For our understanding of plurilinguals and their assets, we draw on Francophone research that highlights:

² Plurilingualism is conceptualised slightly different in other contexts. For instance, it is considered as an “individual multilingualism” by some research in North American context.

Bi/plurilinguals (and monolingual alike) develop specific representations about language(s) and their relationships, based on their social experience and their conscience of normativity (see example, Gajo, 2001; Moore, 2006). These representations contribute to the triggering and empowerment of the activation of a ‘plurilingual strategic tool-box’ – or ‘plurilingual assets’ – for problem solving in language learning. ... The emergence and nature of a plurilingual asset as a potential learning facilitator is highly dependent on the educative culture in which the child is immersed, and on whether (a) interrelations between languages are encouraged through curricular planning; (b) reflectivity is developed in language learning and (c) they are consciously embedded in classroom routines” (Moore & Gajo, 2009, pp. 147-148).

Having this understanding as our starting point, we continue to explore the main questions that we posed in the introductory sections, including how educational practitioners are engaging diversity in different context.

Diversity and Multiliteracies

One area of specific focus for pedagogical tools and practices that support diversity is literacy learning. Linguistic and cultural diversity and multimodal channels are central to Cope and Kalantzis’s (2000) *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*. Their sweeping educational project considers literacy practices as the “basis for a cohesive sociality; a new civility in which differences are used as a productive resource and in which differences are the norm” (p. 15). Cope and Kalantzis and the other researchers who contributed to this generative text interrogated the connection between the local and global, and offered concepts such as design and innovative uses of narrative as a basis for innovative literacy practices.

Multiliteracies theorizing challenges the power structures and hegemonic discourse practices of schools and Cope and Kalantzis (2000) note the pedagogical implications of these shifts:

Local diversity and global connectedness mean not only that there can be no standard; they also mean that the most important skill students need to learn is to negotiate regional, ethnic, or class-based dialects; cultural discourses; the code switching often to be found within a text among different languages, dialects, or registers; different visual and iconic meanings; and variations in the gestural relationships among people, language, and material objects (p. 14).

The multiliteracies approach offers a critical view of the interconnections between languages, cultures, and literacies and suggests pedagogical approaches that examine challenging issues of diversity. Following the multiliteracies theorizing, literacy learning tools can be spaces in which the kind of negotiation described above can occur—one that is inclusive of previously excluded dialects and registers and in which code-switching may be a form of resistance.

Literacy Learning Tools and Critical Literacy

Another aspect of supporting diversity that we have considered is the need for a critical approach to literacy learning. In her discussion of institutional literacy practices, Cadeiro-Kaplan (2002) stated, “Any methodological approach to what it means to be a ‘literate’ person is based on an ideological construct that is inherently political” (p. 373). Children’s first-language socialization determines their proximity to the dominant language and subsequently their access to various cultural and economic settings (Heath, 1983). The ideologies and practices of schooled literacies are not part of all communities, and the fact that the contemporary classroom is marked by diversity calls for an approach that encourages learners to “critically examine and challenge the content of texts and discourses” (p. 373) at the same time as they bring their own “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1991) to their learning.

Luke (2000) affirmed, “[The] project of critical literacy [is] one of access and equity” and that literacy must be relocated “in the visible domains of language and social life” (p. 459). He cited Gee’s (2008) assertion that learners bring “multiple discourse repertoires” to learning, and described the pedagogical challenge in the following manner:

The practical pedagogical task is about teaching students to use discourses to “read” and critique other discourses, about developing languages for talking about language, in ways in which those students whose access to multiple discourse (from communities, from diverse cultural backgrounds and life histories) might have been viewed as lacking can be taken as part of their toolkits for making sense of the world—taken and augmented, expanded and blended with new school-based discourses (p. 459).

Journals, for instance, could well be such domains where learners’ socio-cultural and linguistic repertoires could serve as a starting point for developing critical languages and awareness of discourses. These repertoires might be drawn from forms of family and community-of-origin discourses, popular culture, digital domains, and other hybrid discourse landscapes through which they travel.

Conclusion

Our understanding of diversity, as reflected in this exploration, is broad and includes linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and class-based categories of identity, as well as learners’ experience with multimodal channels of communication. Diversity is seen as resource that can be supported by classroom practices. We are committed to identifying strategies for supporting the multiple resources of diverse learners in contemporary classrooms. Through this panel discussion, we would like to extend and broaden our understanding of diversity through a dialogue with a varied group of educators who bring their own range of resources, knowledge, and pedagogical tools.

References

- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and Symbolic Power* (Edited by John Thompson). Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Cadeiro-Kaplan, K. (2002). Literary Ideologies: Critically Engaging the Language Arts Curriculum. *Language Arts*, 79(5), 372-381.
- Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (2009). "Multi-literacies:" New literacies, New Learning. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 164-195.
doi:10.1080/1554480093076044
- Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (2000). *Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the design of social futures*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Coste, D., Moore, D. and Zarate, G. (2009). *Plurilingual and Pluricultural Competence*. Language policy div., Council of Europe, Strasbourg: Ed. *Originally published in French (1997). *Compétence plurilingue et pluriculturelle*.
- Council of Europe (2001) *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. Language policy div., Council of Europe, Strasbourg: Ed. www.coe.int/lang-CEFR
- Ehlert, D. (2013). Plurilinguals in Motion. Retrieved from the website of a non-profit group, *Multilingual Forum Canada Society* (MFCS; www.multilingualforum.org) on April 18, 2014.
- Ehlert, M. & Moore, D. (2014-in Press). Plurilingual Youth in Motion: Navigating and Reconfiguring the "Multi" in Languages and Identities – Six *Chao Xian Zu* [ethnic Korean Chinese] teenagers in Beijing, China, *International Journal of Education for Diversities (IJE4D)*
- Luke, A. (2012). Critical literacy: Foundational. *Theory Into Practice*, 51(4).
doi:10.1080/00405841.20112.636324
- Moore, D. (2006). Plurilingualism and Strategic Competence in Context. *International Journal of Multilingualism*. Vol. 3, No. 2, 125-138.