

**Pre-service Teachers' Understanding of
Culture and Literacy through
Telecommunication Discussions**

by Margaret A. Gallego
Michigan State University

Working Paper No. 9

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About the Author:

Margaret Gallego is an Assistant Research Scientist in the Laboratory of Human Cognition (LHC) at the University of California, San Diego. She is investigating language and culture among university students and children participating in community based literacy programs. Her research and teaching interests include: cross-cultural literacy, ecological methods of research, the relationship between in and out of school contexts for learning and the development of multiple literacies.

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding and building upon diversity in education has received national attention (AACTE, 1989; Holmes, 1986, 1990). This concern is largely in response to the increasing number of children from linguistically and culturally different backgrounds, many of whom are at risk of school failure (Trueba, 1990). The “urgency” of this situation was vividly recorded a decade ago, by the 40 and 50 percent drop-out rates among Mexican American and Puerto Rican students respectively (Jusenius & Duarte, 1982).

In contrast, demographic reports indicate that the racial/ethnic composition of teachers is increasingly non-minority. This striking imbalance between the student and teaching populations appears to ensure that in the near future, **all** teachers will be instructing students whose cultural backgrounds are different from their own (Grant and Secada, 1990).

Historically, teacher education has prepared teachers to effectively instruct only one cultural group—dominant, mainstream America (Lindsey, 1985). Therefore, novices are woefully underprepared to effectively teach students from diverse backgrounds. Ironically, first year teachers are often placed in urban schools which typically serve culturally and linguistically different children (Zimpher, 1989).

An especially difficult task is providing minority students with meaningful literacy instruction (Delpit, 1988; Heath, 1983; Michaels, 1981; Moll & Diaz, 1985). Although a variety of understandings about literacy and its expression have been reported (Au & Mason, 1981; Gallego & Hollingsworth, 1992; Heath, 1983; Vasquez, 1989), teachers’ own culturally biased views of literacy inhibit their ability to recognize and validate alternative literacy uses and styles (Ferdman, 1990). Such discrepancies make teaching and learning difficult and position the issue of diversity as a problem rather than a resource. Diversity emerges as a paramount instructional challenge for both prospective teachers and teacher educators. For teachers, multicultural education holds promise for recognizing and reconciling divergent perspectives.

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION: PREPARING TEACHERS FOR DIVERSITY

In 1979, multicultural education was defined as “education involving two or more ethnic groups and designed to help participants clarify their own ethnic identity and appreciate that of others, reduce prejudice and stereotyping, and promote cultural pluralism and equal participation” (Thesaurus of ERIC Descriptors). The teachers’ “expectations, attitudes and strategies,” are argued as the cause of student failure.

... unconscious reflex rooted in the teacher’s own middle class background combined with training which consciously or unconsciously may not recognize the possibility of alternative cultural styles and cognitive modes. This combination results in a middle American ethnocentrism [sic] which is destructive to minority students, students from poor families, and any other student who deviates from the mythical norm espoused in teacher training institutions (Thesaurus of ERIC Descriptors).

The responsibility for school failure shifted away from the “victim” and on “culturally deficient educators.” Instruction for all prospective teachers was to pose cultural diversity as positive. Twenty-five years later, the quest for cultural pluralism continues (AACTE, 1989).

Unfortunately, many new methods see diversity as the content for study rather than the context of daily life and the basis of learning. For example, an assortment of “assessment devices” measure pre-service teachers’ attitudes and (mis-)information regarding “other” groups. Survey instruments document pre-service teachers’ “cultural awareness,” “cultural sensitivity” and “cultural attitudes” (Cooper, Beare, & Thorman, 1990; Larke, Wiseman and Bradley 1990). Some programs have introduced supplementary “multicultural course work” or “intensive diversity workshops” (McDiarmid & Price, 1990). Other strategies provide students with diversity experiences with “cultural” groups (Larke, Wiseman & Bradley, 1990).

No matter how well intended, brief and decontextualized experiences with diversity may only serve to affirm pre-conceived negative images of children from diverse backgrounds, rather than call such portrayals into question (Cazden & Mehan, 1989; McDiarmid & Price, 1990). That is, rather than challenge characterizations, they may institutionalize them.

A broader and more authentic multicultural education moves beyond “cultural sensitivity or tolerance” to total educational reconstruction. Viewing diversity as the basis for curriculum, not an elective area of study or appendix to the “standard”, it is the new standard curriculum.

[Multicultural education] challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender among others) that students their communities, and teachers represent. Multicultural education permeates the curriculum and instructional strategies used in schools, as well as the interactions among teachers, students, and parent, and the very way that schools conceptualize the nature of teaching and learning. (Nieto, 1992:208).

For teacher education students, personal experience is the necessary starting point. Authentic multicultural education requires teachers to integrate students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds into the classroom, as the context and the content of study. Therefore, students do not simply receive knowledge from the teacher, but are introduced to multiple perspectives and are encouraged to compare, critique, evaluate, and use their own experiences as bases for action and understanding — a radical change in schools basic form and function.

CREATING MULTICULTURAL SETTINGS: MERGING THEORY AND PRACTICE

Rhetorical support for multicultural educational reform (Holmes, 1986 and others) is abundant, far exceeding the actual practice of multicultural education. The application of multicultural education is difficult and is influenced by several important factors. First, demographics confirm that teacher education students are overwhelmingly mono-cultural (white, middle class females) with little or no

experience with populations culturally different than their own. Although the children in the classrooms that serve as pre-service teachers’ field placements are increasingly multi-racial, the classroom instruction rarely exemplifies multicultural education.

Second, teacher education students participate in few opportunities for building knowledge through relationships with mentors and peers. Although strictly lectured courses are giving way to more open class discussion formats, the mono-cultural student (and faculty) populations makes drawing on personal experience and school history for counter-examples unlikely. In addition, conventional classroom interaction positions teacher as expert and students as novices, inhibiting each from genuinely interacting toward co-constructing knowledge.

Lastly, existing teacher preparation programs typically have emphasized students’ increased “disciplinary knowledge” or understanding of subject matter content (i.e. history, math, etc). Such programs have left “curricular space” for little else. In addition the disciplinary knowledge perspective overlooks the limitation inherent in an “objective” view of knowledge or the arbitrary separation of the creation of knowledge from emotion and experience (Gilligan, 1982). This results in discounting human feelings, lived experience, intuition and the personal ability to co-construct knowledge through relationships with others (Hollingsworth, 1994).

Traditional approaches serve to perpetuate a single cultural view of knowledge (commonly shared among teacher education students and instructors), but do nothing to assist the students’ connection to many of their future students (non-majority children). Banks (1993) insists that students should be provided with opportunities to investigate and determine how cultural assumptions, frames of reference, and the biases within a discipline influence the ways knowledge is constructed. However, pre-service teachers rarely experience occasions to challenge their own ways of knowing as absolute.

Therefore, creating an atmosphere for multicultural instruction is difficult to achieve when students (and faculty) share cultural (midwest, middle class, white) and academic histories (standard school literacy success), and have limited access to individuals (peers, faculty or children) from various cultural groups for constructing knowledge and curriculum. These factors underscore the need for innovative ways of integrating multicultural issues

within existing teacher education programs—ways which will require teachers not only to respect and integrate their students' experiences and knowledge, but to know and question themselves honestly.

UNDERSTANDING SELF AND DIVERSITY THROUGH TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Understanding one's self and others, or cultural relativism (Harris, 1988), is a cornerstone concept in multicultural education. Unfortunately, critical self reflection is often forfeited under the incessant pressure for content coverage in many teacher preparation programs. Research has suggested merely reading articles about diversity or responding to hypothetical scenarios has limited impact on students' beliefs and actions (McDiarmid & Price, 1990). Rather, conceptual change occurs when a variance in beliefs is experienced, and the means and time to reflect on that variance are provided (Posner, Strike, Hewson, & Gertzog, 1982).

In this study, telecommunications served as the means for students at opposite ends of the country to collectively reflect on theoretical propositions posed in course readings, and to examine these propositions against their experiences and observations made in conventional classrooms and out-of-school environments. For teacher education, the use of electronic communications to gain global resources for understanding self and others is timely and accessible (Myers, 1992; Gallego, 1992), and opens new possibilities for integrating multicultural education into existing teacher education programs.

PLANNING FOR A CROSS-CULTURAL ELECTRONIC CONVERSATION

Participants in this study were teacher education students at Michigan State University (MSU) and communications majors at the University of California at San Diego (UCSD). University students' academic programs differed, as did their contexts for interacting with children: conventional classrooms and an out-of-school setting. Individual interviews indicate that for the majority of the students, the field placement experience was their initial contact with children from linguistically and culturally different backgrounds.

At the Midwest site, participants were selected from students enrolled in a literacy course required for teacher certification and taught by the author. The class consisted of 24 females and 2 males, the majority of whom were born and raised in the suburbs of a large metropolitan city within the state. Nine females (8 Anglo, 1 middle eastern) volunteered to participate in the cross-cultural conversation (non-participants maintained a dialogue journal with the instructor). All students observed in elementary school classrooms in the greater metropolitan area for one half day per week (approximately four hours).

Participants at the west coast site were juniors enrolled in elective course work within the Communications Department at USCD. The group included 8 females and 3 males, 2 of whom took the course as an elective in their teacher preparation program. Students were primarily from Southern California, and included three Spanishspeaking students. As a course requirement, students participated in a computer assisted literacy program, *La Clase Magica* (Vasquez, 1992), attended by bilingual (Spanish/English) children after-school. The program consisted of 2 sessions of 2 hours each; a total of four hours participation per week. Participation in the teleconference was mandatory for all students.

The courses included a subset of common articles representing both theoretical and practical orientations to literacy and diversity. These common readings served as anchors to ground the electronic discussion and facilitate students' connections between course content and their field experiences.

Telecommunication ability and training was different for both groups. Both were given in-class instruction, for receiving and sending electronic mail. However, due to the MSU students' unfamiliarity with computers and general apprehension, triads were organized to provide one another with technical assistance and support. Each triad collectively contributed to the ongoing dialogue by either initiating topics for discussion or responding to the ongoing conversation. UCSD students were also required to contribute to the dialogue individually at least once per week. The discussion was maintained by posting student entries on a computer bulletin board and was archived.

TALKING ABOUT LITERACY AND DIVERSITY

The dialogue that followed was as dynamic and as complex as the concepts discussed. In the recursive style typical of genuine conversation, topics were initiated and dropped and comments addressed topics under discussion as well as those already dismissed. Conversational exchanges reflected students' expertise, comfort level or interest and drew upon their familiarity with varied resources (e-mail, field placement, instructors, etc.). The following conversational excerpts illustrate two central themes: literacy and diversity.

Students' questions illustrated their naivete and their valiant efforts toward understanding these concepts: "How do you teach a group of heterogeneous students?"; "What is literacy?" "What is the agenda of those in power [white America]?"

After reading an article common to both sites (Au & Mason, 1981), MSU students relayed concern about the ambiguity and tension between instructional practices that are culturally responsive and those which stereotype.

... would the participation structure that worked for this [Hawaiian] group be sufficient in a heterogeneous classroom? ... teachers need to be aware of different cultural backgrounds and use that knowledge to implement a variety of participation structures ... integrating the classroom to benefit the majority as well ...
(1/23, initiation, MSU)

A response from another triad of MSU students opt for a middle ground position, in which children's linguistic and cultural differences are the backdrop for their "individuality".

... does it really matter if their [children's] performance is culture oriented, or idiosyncratic? Who does it matter to, and why? After all doesn't determining a student's level of academic performance on the basis of culture border on stereotyping?
(1/25, initiation, MSU)"

The subjective nature of definitions pertaining to diversity and literacy was highlighted when students considered the use of children's native languages for classroom instruction. Students' personal opinions and observations (in and out of school) were instrumental to constructing their arguments. Their statements revealed simplistic understandings of literacy, diversity and culture within broader notions of society. In some cases their perceptions were erroneous, biased and misguided. Nonetheless, they reflected "thoughts in progress."

Should black dialect be accepted in schools?... [yes] we should not deny their culture and impose ours'...but children must be able to use standard English in the "real" world ... they [students] will be able to speak and use standard English because they have been translating standard English (SE) into black english vernacular (BEV) all their lives" (1/28, initiation, MSU)

... this [BEV] is a sticky subject ... making the assumption that BEV is a language and an assessment whether a child could survive or get by in the "real world" as you called it ... in California people speak only Spanish or Chinese in Chinatown (San Francisco) and they get by in their communities ... What happens to the children ...? If they are dropping out of school then we are defeating ourselves by not allowing them to speak their language or learn in their language ... one option ... is peer tutoring ... I feel ultimately..children who don't speak Standard English will suffer because they haven't been socialized with White Mr. Rogers or Sesame Street ... most likely because of the lack of ... a T.V. set, (1/29, response, UCSD)

... in the article, Sims found that BEV affects children's comprehension almost as though it were a foreign language ... these children were also placed in the lowest reading group due to lack of English oral proficiency ... like those described by Moll & Diaz using Spanish. ... most of the students came from low socioeconomic families and have little or no exposure to reading outside of school ... is it the dialect or lack of exposure that most affects the children's reading comprehension? (1/31, response, MSU)

Reading comprehension and the role of language become focal issues to the cross-site conversation. A pedagogical problem encountered at the after school site contextualized the hypothetical language debate. The following excerpt illustrates a UCSD student soliciting help from others on the network.

Hi everybody! This is just a quick comment on literacy. I really need some feedback, because I'm a little hazy on the subject ... the issue: the ability to not only read, but comprehend ... Manny is a 9 yr. old boy whose first language is Spanish he speaks English fluently, but is not able to read Spanish at all and is limited in [reading] English. He can read whole sentences, even paragraphs sounding completely correct, yet when I ask him to paraphrase or tell me the meaning in his own words, he is unable to do so. It took me almost a quarter to figure out that he was not able to comprehend any of the words he was reading. He never lets on that he doesn't understand.. In school, his abilities may be overrated ... I would really like some help on further methods to aid Manny ... What is Literacy? is the same as comprehension? ... _____, help me out here in some practical teaching applications!!!! (2/2, initiation, UCSD).

Venturing to distinguish reading performance from comprehension, students merged the UCSD students' experiences at the out of school environment with the MSU students' interest in minority school literacy achievement and their budding understanding of the reading/comprehension relationship.

Hi...we were reminded of the portion of the Moll and Diaz article were the students were asked to read stories in English but were then allowed to express their interpretation in Spanish. Would this work for Manny? Are you bilingual? Could you possibly implement something like the scaffolding technique used by Diaz? ..we wonder about similar issues involving bilingual students?.. (2/4, response, MSU).

...you're thought about Manny and literacy is right on the money ... the kids that can read in English and yet only understand a small portion ... but reading means comprehension too ... (2/7, response, UCSD)

Students supported each others' growing understanding of tough concepts and practices. External advice in the form of common course readings served to scaffold their understanding of reading comprehension. In addition, indirect participants such as "outside listeners" on the system (research collaborators) offered students instructional options which proved to be effective in other settings. Telecommunications provided the means to draw resources to the intellectual enterprise without suppressing it.

... at — we developed a small group reading techniques called "question asking reading" ... it is all about comprehension and it might just work well with Manny ... a relatively brief description is available in a few pubs from —, check with — about it if you are interested, (2/7, response, UCSD, external expert).

Reading is usually an interaction between top down and bottom up processing, ... some kids who are still learning get stuck using too much of one strategy and not enough of the other. Of course there are times when using just one is reasonable. But most times you need both guessing and hint giving ... encourage [them] to 'unglue' their reading from the print and engage in hypothesizing ... (2/8, response, external expert).

... what is literacy? ... well we talked about it and we used to think of literacy just as being able to read ... now we feel that literacy must include understanding ... of words, of meanings, of culture and differences ... (2/11, response, MSU)

Grounded in the previous practical example, students further expanded the discussion to address broader issues regarding literacy and diversity. Students were critical of each other's perspectives and called into question the entire language dilemma, essentially a "reality check" to ascertain whether culture (whose culture?) and literacy can be merged.

...what is culturally sensitive curriculum ... I attended a lecture by Gates ... he emphasized that differential access and knowledge is not a conspiracy. People do want diversity, but ... we need to rethink. ... cultural education ... only two African-American authors are

assigned in high schools ... two books represent the compromise ... to deal with diversity ... celebrating and discussing holidays are educators attempting to set up a culturally sensitive pedagogy ... statistics ... “whites” are no longer the majority in number ... providing an education that reflects the diverse needs ... is obvious ...t he challenge lies in redefining knowledge to incorporate everyone’s background ... this brings us back to the original question asked by MSU, “How do you teach a classroom of children from different backgrounds effectively?” ... an LA TIME article suggested linguistic buddy systems ... to couple children who speak the same language ... What does everyone think? ... How can we integrate different cultures in the classroom without allowing one to dominate over the others, but instead allowing all to have an equal voice? (2/7, initiation, UCSD)

... in a multilingual education program in San Francisco we tried linguist buddies ... we had thirteen different languages...out of necessity we decided to experiment in mixing them up — Spanish with Chinese, Arabic and Hmong ... this was more successful to transition predominately immigrant children into the mainstream them keeping them linguistically separate ... pairs often developed a strong cross-cultural bond...having to overcome language and cultural obstacles ... (2/8, response, MSU, external expert)

Further discussion posed reconciling culture and literacy as a futile effort given the current existing power relations.

...White males are running the culture lesson in this country ... setting the standards and attempting to make a culture of their own for “White America.” Of course we need to teach many different culturally diverse lessons to our culturally diverse society, but don’t you see ... it’s not the agenda for those in power. I suppose our discussion is educationally productive, but it amazes me when we ask questions like, “What can we do

to get diverse cultural lessons taught in our schools?” ... it seems a little idealistic ... (2/8, response, UCSD)

Some students were overwhelmed by the instructional implications for managing a multicultural education curriculum. Their comments were reminiscent of previous statements regarding the tension between cultural loyalties (as defined by the majority) and attempts to identify and implement “fair” instructional practices.

... it would be very difficult to have a classroom with no dominant culture ... there has to be some common ground among students ... a unifying factor ... how to incorporate cultural knowledge. How do you teach a group of heterogeneous students effectively? (2/11, response, MSU)

Other students viewed the power distribution as the basis for multicultural instruction. Specifically, students suggested a critical stance on textbooks and the standard curricular content.

... I believe that this cross-cultural understanding and integration of students can be achieved in spite of White men of power writing textbooks. The “reality” within our society is not reflected by these textbooks and that can be the first multicultural lesson that we teach ... is the problem with the textbooks or with the attitudes of Americans hold toward people of “different” cultures ... many really believe that “success” can only be achieved through understanding English and Western ways of life. These people fail to see the validity of anything non-English and therefore create the separation which labels people inferior ... (2/12, response, MSU)

Subsequent discussion revealed the complexity in applying theory into practice. Previously understood concepts such as “majority,” formerly presumed to refer to the mainstream culture, were no longer straightforward. Notions of “fairness” were equated with “sameness,” which prompted students to examine instruction for diversity within multicultural and mono-cultural contexts.

... teaching towards the majority ... what if the classroom is a majority black classroom and the teacher teaches to the black culture (information and methods), isn't that what we are trying to avoid? In the past methods and content based on white society has left out history and other cultures ... suffered a loss in self concept and pride in their heritage ... we should not teach only to the majority be it Latino, Black, Asian ... (2/13, response, MSU)

... and don't forget classes that are 100% one ethnicity - an aspect of multi-cultural education that isn't priority ... White kids who simply never encounter people of another ethnicity ... 'we don't have a problem of multiculturalism here, the kids in this school all have the same background'— you know they and you have a REAL problem... (2/14, response, UCSD, external expert)

DISCUSSION

The cross-cultural conversations provided students a supportive, non-judgmental environment in which to wrestle with complex theoretical concepts and tough pragmatic issues with local and distant peers. Students benefitted from varied cultural perspectives and distinct experiences with literacy learning. Personal (cultural and geographic) and academic (communications and teacher education) histories positioned each as an expert. Consequently teacher education students from the midwest site participated in the discussion most often when addressing topics they were interested in or had relevant experience in, e.g., ability grouping, assessment and multicultural practices. Likewise, UCSD students studying communications primarily contributed to the conversation regarding global issues, e.g., social and political agendas for literacy and diversity. This arrangement provided for experts to learn from the open and genuine comments generated by novices. The discussion required students to fully articulate their positions and avoided assuming prior knowledge or common knowledge about classrooms.

Building on their “expert” roles, students combined available resources (e.g., course readings, field placements, personal prior knowledge, instructors’ opinions, class discussion, and e-mail

conversations generated across the two sites) to substantiate their perspectives and construct an argument (Gallego, 1992). Students called for clearer definitions of literacy, as well as applicable practices and strategies for children’s literacy learning. Relieved of the expectation to learn prescriptions and correctness (political or otherwise) or to find the elusive “right answer,” students freely expressed controversial and unconventional views about culture and diversity.

Increased references to self were facilitated by the “no dumb question” premise of our interaction. This foundation allowed students to view concepts as ambiguous, and therefore as opportunities for the exploration of alternatives without constraints. Indeed, entries documented students’ progression from their exclusive use of external resources and references to experts (i.e., articles, books, university faculty) for substantiating a position, to trusting their own lived experiences as valid resources of information equal to, or in some cases more relevant than, “expert” sources. This was a positive step towards developing a sense of self-credibility and the skill of soliciting and trusting the opinions of others — a valuable by-product of this study.

CONCLUSION

If students are to critically examine their perspectives and beliefs, students must be granted “direct contact with students from cultures other than [their own] combined with translation and interpretation gained from discussion with a knowledgeable and able supervisor, professor, critic teacher or other tutor,” (Grant & Secada, 1990: 417).

This study provided opportunities for students to interact with others in a way that made the rich diversity of cultural and geographic backgrounds central to exploring and understanding issues of literacy and diversity. The electronically mediated discussions described here enhanced the cross-cultural experiences gained by participants at both sites, as students sought to apply concepts considered in class while interacting with children in traditional classrooms and in an alternative after-school setting.

As computers become commonplace on university campuses, the instructional use of technology is promising and accessible. Currently, computer use is rarely applied beyond word-

processing, a situation which parallels the use (or lack) of computers in schools. To impact prospective teachers regarding the integration of computers for real purposes and content-learning, we need to provide courses which integrate technology with subject matter. The students who participated in this electronic conversation strongly advocated the innovative use of technology, particularly computer technology, for their own university instruction. They felt that such model experiences would help increase their confidence and thus the possibility that they too, as future teachers, would apply technology to content-learning in their classrooms (Gallego, 1992).

This study demonstrated the promise technology holds for exploring and understanding culture, diversity and literacy. The study illustrates that telecommunication technology is a viable and informative alternative to traditional learning. I invite others to explore the potential of this powerful tool of telecommunication as a significant instructional resource.

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