

Traveling tags: The informal literacies of Mexican newcomers in and out of the classroom

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Abstract

This article documents tagging as one of several informal literacy practices used by newcomer Mexican youth in a Midwest school and classroom setting. Specifically, it details how tagging travels into the classroom. Using the tool of interactional ethnography to analyze videotaped classroom observation data of an English Learner Science setting, I account for the instructional context in which three newcomer Mexican girls tag the whiteboard, focusing specifically on the social positionings they are able to construct in the classroom with and without these practices. Out of this analysis, I suggest that informal “literacies of display,” like tagging, might, in the classroom, be more productively regarded as “literacies of assistance.” They are proactive requests by newcomer youth for the help they need in developing cultural fluency between their transnational identity and the classroom context [Aikenhead, G. S. & Jegede, O. J. (1999). Cross-cultural science education: A cognitive explanation of a cultural phenomenon. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 36(3), 269–287]. My account challenges facile interpretations of resistance that marginalize youth’s use of such informal literacies.

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Teenagers from Mexico enroll each year as new students at the high school in Captainville, Iowa.¹ They do so because adult members of their families have come to that community to work at the Bensen meatpacking plant. Bensen’s reliance on a low-paid, unskilled Latino labor force, predominantly Mexican, has made it one of the Midwest’s most profitable hog plants. Enduring dangerous and exploitative working conditions (Human Rights Watch, 2004) is the trade-off these Mexican families make for a job that provides them an opportunity for longer-term settlement and affordability in the U.S. while sustaining, with what’s left of their paycheck,

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¹ Throughout this article, people and place names are pseudonyms.

their families back in Mexico. Just as understanding their labor is an integral part of understanding a globalizing economy, documenting their children's experiences in U.S. schools is an integral part of documenting schooling from a globalizing, transnational perspective.

When these teenagers enroll at Captainville High School, they take on the identity of a "U.S. Mexican" student, an individual of Mexican origin, either U.S. or foreign-born, who is attending American schools. This label conveniently allows scholars to trace and talk about the educational outcomes of the general U.S. Mexican student population, outcomes that are, by all accounts, distressing because they underscore persistent gaps in socio-economic opportunity and well-being that exist between dominant and non-dominant ethnicities. The number of U.S. Mexican youth, for example, who are not completing high school and college is higher than that of other major ethnic groups (Camarota, 2001; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Rumbaut, 1996). But the "U.S. Mexican" label, however, hides the important variability that exists within this group. The U.S. Mexican student population exhibits wide-ranging differences, among them language proficiency (in Spanish, English, as well as possible indigenous languages), educational history, and class, all of which can be related to length of residence in the U.S. Asking how *newcomer* Mexican adolescents position themselves with respect to U.S. Mexican identity affords us the opportunity to look beyond the label and attend to the lived experience of new hybridity, of learning to become "other" with respect to both the home (Mexico) and host (U.S.) cultures. This process, as Trueba (2004, p. 88) says, is the hallmark of transnational identity. If the 21st century stands to be one of continued "Mexicanization" of U.S. immigration (Lyman, 2006), this implies continued "Mexicanization" of U.S. classrooms. It behooves educational scholars, therefore, to pay close attention to the identity and literacy practices of newcomer Mexican students for how they inform understandings of the classroom as a heterogeneously constructed space (Kamberelis, 2001; Koole, 2003).

Three questions guide this article: (1) How do newcomer Mexican adolescents use informal literacy practices in acts of transcultural repositioning?; (2) How, when, and why do these practices travel into a classroom context?; and (3) What do these practices reveal about the identity processes of this particular student population? To address these questions, I draw on photographs, videotape, and interviews collected from my ethnographic research on and work with newcomer Mexican students at the high school in Captainville, Iowa. These data illustrate the varied ways that newcomer Mexican students use several informal literacy practices that, drawing on Guerra (2004), I will describe as acts of transcultural repositioning.

In the first half of the paper, I describe processes of transnational identity formation with respect to the phenomenon of globalization and the associated generation of informal literacy practices. I describe how I observed newcomer Mexican youth engage in informal literacy practices in the general school context as "literacies of display" (Hamilton, 2000) of their transnational identities. I raise the question of whether these practices travel or not into the classroom context and, if so, for what purpose. In the second half of the paper, I document how three newcomer girls engaged in tagging in a science classroom activity. Using the analytical tool of interactional ethnography (Castanheira, Crawford, Dixon, & Green, 2001), I detail the nature and sequence of interactions that led to the girls' engagement in this practice, examining, in particular, the different social positionings they construct through both unsanctioned and sanctioned practices in the classroom. I suggest that when informal "literacies of display" travel into the classroom context, they constitute "literacies of assistance." These are proactive requests by transnational youth for the help they need in developing cultural fluency between their transnational identity and the classroom context (Aikenhead & Jegede, 1999).

From this analysis, I put forth two significant claims. The first is that informal literacy practices of transcultural repositioning can and do travel from informal school settings to more formal

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