

Literacy and Culture in the Classroom: An Interview with Kris Gutierrez

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PROFILE

Kris Gutierrez is an Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies and head of the division of Administration, Curriculum, and Teaching Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her experience as director of a freshman writing program for provisionally admitted students sparked her interest in the issue of literacy, and her concern over the gate-keeping function of literacy led her to Ph.D. research in rhetoric and composition at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Prof. Gutierrez' literacy work has continued to investigate the issues of identity, marginalization, social justice, and power relations in the classroom. Her studies of the social organization of literacy have centered around the connections between language, culture, and human development. This discourse-based research informs teachers of the social practices of the classroom by examining the social and cognitive consequences of literacy practices.. Prof. Gutierrez' current research investigates effective literacy practices, issues of urban mobility, and the effects of intervention programs on literacy and problem-solving.

INTRODUCTION

In this interview Prof. Gutierrez discusses the issue of literacy as a gate keeper and how her own experiences as a bilingual Latina and as a teacher of writing led to her interest in sociocultural understandings of literacy and language learning. She emphasizes the importance of discourse-based analysis, its capacity to capture and illustrate for teachers the discursive practices of the classroom and their consequences on literacy learning. Dr. Gutierrez also discusses the issue of high urban mobility and other research projects that she is pursuing that employ a multi-method and multi-disciplinary framework..

INTERVIEW

Turner: *Could you tell us how your interest in language and literacy began?*

Gutierrez: As a young bilingual child it was difficult not to become acutely aware of the privilege of knowing two languages and to understand quickly the power of

language. Fluency in Spanish allowed me to serve at the age of three and four as translator, cultural broker as it were, for my great grandmother who spoke no English. My languages also created a special place and role in my grandparents' home and gave me access to conversations my parents had—conversations that were not intended for their children's ears. Becoming biliterate was almost inevitable it seemed. There was something wonderful about third and fourth generation Chicano children who could move so easily across these fluid linguistic and cultural borders.

Our rich linguistic resources and literacy skills, however, were neither valued nor utilized in school. In fact, many of us remark that our bilingualism, our biliteracy skills, were beaten out of us. More precisely, we were swatted with a large wooden paddle if we spoke Spanish in school, including on the playground. We lived amidst such powerful contradictions. Fluency in two languages was invaluable in our community and we were praised for it—as long as we used our special knowledge outside of school. What is so ironic, though, is that so many of our European-American peers worked hard to learn Spanish as well; and they did. We lived in a very integrated community (50% White/50% Chicano) so we drew on one another's linguistic and cultural resources in our everyday lives. I think I was a teenager before I realized that "Mexicans" didn't have tea and saffron bread every afternoon as we did with our English landlady.

My interest in literacy clearly was shaped by own experiences at home and school. My father, a copper miner in the local mine, wrote a column in the weekly newspaper on "Americanism"; he was very involved in the Veterans of Foreign Wars and like most Chicanos who fought in WWII very patriotic. I was required to help him conceptualize, write and edit his weekly column. Because language and literacy were such productive tools for me, it came as such a surprise to learn that literacy was the gate keeper or the mechanism that sorted us into our various learning tracks in high school and that influenced the majors we would select in college. I was always the only Chicana in my English major classes.

Turner: *How does the issue of literacy as a gate keeper play out in your work?*

Gutierrez: First I need to give you some background. After I got my Masters, I worked as a director of freshman composition for provisionally admitted, under represented minority university students, including children of poor white migrant workers. It was in this context that I began to look beyond the written text and beyond "deficit-model" theories for answers to students' literacy practices. I was beginning to understand the inextricable links between language, culture, and human development and to focus on the language and literacy practices of the classroom and their relationship to what students learned. I came to understand the explanatory power of other language and learning theories that challenged prevailing classroom literacy practices that regarded these students' linguistic knowledge/practices as liability rather than resource. However, these "deficit" theories

about language and learning became institutionalized in ways that prevented my students from receiving college credit in their college writing courses despite the content and rigorous exit standards of their writing courses. Their literacy skills and practices were deemed “remedial” *a priori* because of who they were racially and ethnically rather than by the literacy skills they had acquired by the end of the courses we developed. People assumed that the students’ literacy skills were necessarily inferior and, thus, that they could not appropriate academic literacy.

Turner: *How did you combat these limited understandings of language learning?*

Gutierrez: Actually, in several ways; we had both political and academic solutions. Even though this was in the late 70’s, we held mass demonstrations protesting the unjust policies of the English Department. The protest resulted in the takeover of the building that housed the College Dean’s office. While this resulted in a temporary stay in the implementation of the policy to de-credit our courses, we were ultimately able to win the “literacy” battle when we were allowed to demonstrate that there was no significant difference in the performance of our students’ exit compositions from those of the regularly admitted students’ writing.

In addition to defining this struggle as a moral and political issue, we were motivated to develop the most academically sound program we could. The writing program’s success, I believe, was clearly attributable to the fact that our pedagogy, our instructional practices, were well grounded in theory and practice. Our teachers were theoretically equipped. We were under such intense and continued scrutiny that it was essential that we understood and incorporated the most current literacy theories and practices. I began my Ph.D. work in rhetoric and composition theory then. That’s when I “discovered” Vygotsky and language socialization theories and began to understand writing as a sociocultural process. The large academic support program that I then directed became a necessary and natural laboratory for my examination. These sociocultural understandings of learning and language learning in particular helped me articulate what I was observing in the everyday literacy practices of my students. I began looking not just at language but through language to document the relationship between students’ current literacy practices and the literacy practices of the remedial courses to which they had been confined most of their academic lives. I also recognized that the writing theories that were so much a part of early writing research in the late 70’s and 80’s were ineffective, or at least incomplete, models for capturing the socio-cultural nature of the teaching and learning of literacy. To understand better the related issues of identity, marginalization, social justice, and power relations in the classroom, I also became very interested in classroom discourse, social theories, and critical pedagogy.

Turner: *How did you build on these sociocultural views to develop your current perspective?*

Gutierrez: I think there was a natural evolution from my training in literacy and qualitative research methods to my interest in issues of culture and human development. I accepted a post-doctoral fellowship at UCLA to study with Ron Gallimore and the Sociobehavioral Research Group. It was serendipitous that I decided during my post-doc to audit courses taught by Alessandro Duranti, Tom Weisner and subsequently audited several classes with Elinor Ochs. These classes spoke to me in ways that no other courses had. Their work related more to my own interests and studies and introduced me to new methodologies for unpacking the literacy practices of urban schools. I began to use discourse analysis in particular to unravel the processes of literacy learning in the classroom. It's no wonder that CLIC (UCLA's interdisciplinary Center for Language, Interaction, and Culture) feels so much like home to me.

Turner: *How have you incorporated these theories into your current work?*

Gutierrez: My work focuses on the social practices of the classroom, that is, the curriculum and instruction in the domain of literacy. In particular, my research (with coauthors Joanne Larson, Betsy Rymes, and Lynda Stone) examines the social and cognitive consequences of literacy practices in urban school contexts. As obvious as it may seem, curriculum studies, literacy studies and their practices have, by and large, had little to do with one another. Curriculum, informed by sociology of education, has not in any sustained way addressed the questions of language and the central role language plays in the social construction of curriculum. Recent studies of literacy, on the other hand, have not yet acknowledged how literacy curriculum shapes and is shaped by the discursive practices in the classroom. Consequently, I think the essential relationship between literacy learning and the social practices of the classroom has not been substantively examined.

While many studies have shed significant insight into literacy learning, most have not used micro analysis to illustrate the complexity of classroom communities and their social organization of learning. In response to this need, I posit a situated theory of literacy learning that argues that the development of literacy arises from the child's intellectual and communicative participation within the context of the classroom community and its forms of literacy activity. To accomplish this, my research integrates sociocultural theories of learning and language and social theory to examine classroom social practices and their relationship to literacy learning. My work is ethnographic in nature and I rely on discourse analytic strategies to examine these classroom practices and processes. Lynda Stone and I argue in one of our recent papers that since we see literacy learning as a social and cultural process that links language and thinking in classroom practices, we need a theoretical perspective that accounts for or acknowledges the interaction between the social milieu and the individual. I think the robustness of the sociocultural perspective is that it allows us to focus our analysis on the mutual and interdependent relationship between the individual and the social world.

Some of the more exciting work that the gang of four has done (Gutierrez, Larson, Rymes, and Stone) examines the various social spaces that constitute classroom life. The issues of time and space, then, become important dimensions in understanding how these multiple spaces overlap with one another, or are laminated—to use Ochs' term—and construct the social practices of the classroom. The concept of the third space, a particular social space we've observed in classrooms in which a productive heteroglossia emerges, has been taken up by both researchers and practitioners. In particular, our work in urban schools has become of particular interest to educators because the issues of equity and excellence have become recurrent themes throughout our study of literacy.

Turner: *Is this why you think classroom teachers are responding to your work?*

Gutierrez: In part I think it's because we share common interests and goals but mostly I think it's because our research is classroom based. We do long-term work in schools. So there's a level of credibility and trust that comes from studying teaching and learning *in situ*. Certainly, the increasingly collaborative nature of our work, particularly with our more recent projects, leads to more agentive roles for the teachers in constructing the research goals and agenda. In addition, classroom teachers tell me that our microanalysis makes visible what was previously invisible to them in much of educational research. They can finally see, they say, what researchers have been talking about and more important, know then how to intervene in their own teaching processes. The use of ethnography and discourse analysis, in particular, has allowed us to talk about sensitive issues such as power and opportunity to learn and to show how these phenomena are socially constituted. By illustrating these processes as they naturally occur, we don't have to use labels such as racism and bad teaching; instead, we can show the social and cognitive consequences of particular literacy instructional practices. By focusing on the consequences of classroom practices, teacher-bashing (of which educational researchers are often accused) is minimized, if not eliminated. This focus is congruent with my goal to change classroom practice. Another central goal, of course, is to understand better literacy development in school contexts.

Turner: *Your research, then, actually addresses two distinct yet overlapping communities?*

Gutierrez: Yes, I have to meet the rigorous demands of the research community and another set of rigorous albeit different demands from practitioners. To combat what I consider to be the largely atheoretical orientation of most teacher-training programs, I consciously reject teacher training practices that do not treat teachers as intellectuals. Consequently, I always articulate the theories that guide my work in the various articles I publish and in the talks I give to classroom teachers. It is for these reasons as well that courses I have offered to novice teachers are de-

signed to help them develop a theoretical and methodological tool kit for conducting reflective practice. Teachers find ethnographic research methods and discourse analytic strategies particularly useful to them as they attempt to understand and change their own practices.

Most of my teaching, though, is with Ph.D. students who are very interested in theory and the links between theory, policy, and practice. Because education as a field is becoming multidisciplinary, so is the training, then, our students receive. For example, our work in literacy, although grounded in cultural-historical theories of development, is informed by a hybrid approach or framework that systematically and strategically blends theoretical constructs from linguistic, social, psychological, and anthropological theories. I'm trying to construct for my students in education a community that rejects traditionally defined intellectual and theoretical boundaries. This is also one of the many reasons we participate in a community like CLIC.

Turner: *What research projects has this theoretical orientation resulted in?*

Gutierrez: I currently have three projects. I have a five year research project, funded by the United States Department of Education, to study effective literacy practices in three local districts. In this project, I hope to develop a more dynamic and situated understanding of what counts as effective practice across three very different learning communities. We're currently in our third year of funding. A second project emerged from this study. In the course of studying effective practice, one of our school principals challenged us to define and examine effective practice in the context of perhaps the most serious constraint facing urban schools—the issue of high urban mobility. Urban schools in Los Angeles, and in many states across the nation, experience turnover rates as high as 60-80% from the beginning to the end of the school year. We are now asking, how do you construct and sustain effective learning communities when the community is constantly in flux?

Our newest project (UC Links), part of a UC system wide effort spearheaded by Michael Cole of the Laboratory for Comparative Human Cognition at UC San Diego, is designed to create a new activity system or a new cultural setting in the local community that transforms learning for both undergraduate and graduate UCLA students and elementary school students in one urban Los Angeles school. The intervention, an after-school program, uses computer-mediated activity to enhance literacy and problem-solving abilities for its participants. We are also interested in the issues of transferability and sustainability. To that end, we are studying how the knowledge and skills children learn in the after-school activity are imported into the classroom. Similarly, we are interested in how current classroom practices make use of or under utilize what children learn through participation in our project. Ultimately, we are concerned with how such projects can change school culture and how the local community can collaborate and maintain this project over time. In this way, my work is always action-oriented.

Turner: *What are the implications, then, for your future work?*

Gutierrez: Clearly, I see doing much more collaborative work with colleagues from other disciplines. The study of urban mobility, for example, should include colleagues from urban planning, sociology, anthropology, applied linguistics, public health, and education—or a variety of other combinations. I'd like to work on research projects that have these multiple layers of complexity and that have some significant social impact on the research and local community.

Myrna Gwen Turner is a graduate student in UCLA's department of TESL & Applied Linguistics. Her current research investigates knowledge displays among novice computer users.

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