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Guadalupe López-Bonilla and Karen Englander (Eds.) (2011)
*Discourses and Identities in Contexts of Educational Change:
Contributions from the United States and Mexico*. NY: Peter
Lang.

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First published in Spanish under the title *Discursos e identidades en contextos de cambio educativo* (Plaza y Valdés, 2010) and then in English barely three months later, López-Bonilla and Englander have put together a timely volume of papers that explores issues related to identity and discourse in different educational contexts. At the center of the discussions developed by each author is a concern for educational change—change for better or for worse, change we would like to see, change that seems a long time coming, change that sometimes makes matters worse. Rather than looking for sweeping transformations of schooling, educational practices, policies, and academic contexts, the chapters in this book look carefully at the intricacies of the everyday business of going to school,

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being a teacher, a learner or a researcher trying to understand the new demands of globalization for institutions of higher learning. The authors weave together an intricate relationship between context, discourse and identity, addressing issues related to people learning to navigate different social contexts, (particularly those related to education), and how they respond to the complex demands these contextual shifts make on them.

They often find themselves in the position of having to “retool” how they present themselves to others, what they value, or how they interact with others. They experience bureaucratic procedures, institutional arrangements, demands on their time and person that most of the people close to them have little or no experience with. As a result, the demands often cause contradictions, struggle and resistance when social actors try to participate in new or different contexts without alienating themselves from their families and communities.

Writing in the US and Mexico, the authors articulate theoretical and methodological approaches from discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and literacy studies to analyze a broad range of institutional settings, professional activities, school scenarios, and social practices. Many of the topics they explore are well known—and often they revisit nagging questions related to inequality, discrimination, gender bias, power, and social order—yet their discussions and multiplicity of perspectives shed new light by giving voice to those directly involved and by constructing new analytical approaches, but more importantly by integrating their own perspectives in a rich, in-depth inquiry into the hard questions of language, discourse, culture and education.

In this book, students, teachers, and scholars will find thoughtful discussions about education in a variety of contexts. Collectively the authors deal with current and lingering problems, global issues, local and situated practices. As a researcher, I found many echoes with my own concerns about the processes of inquiry—from Moje’s honesty about things gone awry to Green and Heras’ careful tracking of how their changing questions resulted in shifts in their analytical methodologies. Those readers hoping for simple answers will surely be disappointed, but those looking for complex portraits,

nuanced descriptions and theoretical examinations that can cope with often simultaneous and contradictory truths will find multiple suggestions and approaches for dealing with the messiness of reality—be it virtual or real; explicit or inferred; spoken, written, drawn or silenced. In the texts one appreciates the authors' sense of commitment to their work and their research participants in a variety of contexts and situations: Spanish speakers in California; Indigenous students in Mexico; video gamers, children, youth, teachers, and scholars on both sides of the border. A continuous thread that holds the texts together is—as Colin Lankshear suggests in the Introduction—a deep concern for those who have the odds heavily stacked against them as they navigate through the established order, structure and hierarchy.

In the opening lines of his chapter, Lankshear lays out the main topics, and nicely summarizes the book in his opening comments:

This book brings together a diverse group of collaborating authors from Mexico and the United States, predominantly from the neighboring states of California (United States) and Baja California. This creates very interesting possibilities for addressing the theme of discourses and identities within contexts of educational change within the current conjuncture, in view of such considerations as language and population demographics north of the border, immigration policies and dynamics, economic and wider cultural trends associated with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), histories of academic collaboration (not to mention history itself), and the comparatively high levels of penetration of new (and not so new) technologies and their extension into everyday popular culture on both sides of the fence. These possibilities are amplified by the book's organization around three expansive themes that tap strongly into its focus on educational change: educational practices and identities; literacy, youth cultures and virtual spaces; and educational policies and professional identities. Each theme is addressed by North American and Mexican participants, infusing multiple perspectives into the discussion. The outcome is a nicely integrated

discussion of wider ranging aspects of discourse and identity in relation to engagement in formal education and non-formal learning under contemporary conditions (p. 1).

The book is divided into three sections. The first section, (Educational Practices and Identities) brings together papers by Hugh Mehan, Nadia Khalil and J. César Morales; Elizabeth Birr Moje and Guadalupe López-Bonilla. Their papers center on the crisscrosses between meaning, action, and social order in different contexts for learning, particularly those that are commonly known as in and out of school. They ask questions about identity construction and destruction, preservation and transformation in relation to the agendas of schooling, the relevance of academic work and the intersections of class, gender and formal education. The second section of the book (Literacy, Youth Cultures and Virtual Spaces) contains chapters by James Paul Gee, and Carmen Pérez-Fragoso. Their work enhances the themes mentioned above by adding discussions of virtual and real space in important academic activities such as young children learning to read and adolescent students doing collaborative work on and off line—another distinction of different contexts of learning. The final part (Educational Policies and Professional Identities) includes chapters authored by Judith Green and Ana Inés Heras; Alma Carrasco and Rollin Kent; Karen Englander; and Guadalupe Tinajero-Villavicencio.

As a reader I found the book interesting and engaging, with some unexpected turns. Often when I stop and re read a passage it is because it is ambiguous or because I do not understand what I am reading for some reason. In this book however, I often stopped because I encountered a phrase or fragment that surprised me—a fresh idea or a new methodological turn (see Green and Heras' piece)—or I found something in writing that I have thought about also but not quite finished articulating (see Gee's contribution). In the text I also came across a statements that surprised me, for example, finding the inclusion of "abilities" and "skills" in socio-cultural analyses of literacy and knowledge—terms and methodologies that respond to different logics—making me ask myself if these different approaches (or versions of literacy) can be articulated in a single argument (see Moje's and Mehan, Nadia and

Morales' chapters). The book is conceptually interesting, offering multiple approximations of notions such as knowledge, opportunity, participation, activity, learning, identity and change as well as compound constructions such as knowledge-in-action or game-like learning that offer precise additions to often used terms.

Perhaps one of the notions that best represents the conceptual richness and also serves as a unifying theme is the idea of *change*. Although their analytical examinations differ, a common position held by all contributors is that change in education is difficult, slow moving and often hard to identify. Furthermore, the book offers clear evidence that change is not always forward moving or "for the good", it can also be a set back or the result of political backlash. The book offers a wealth of examples and examinations for understanding change.

Mehan, Nadia and Morales explore issues related to students from under-represented minority backgrounds preparing to go to college. Their access to academic practices meant not only to gain new discourses but also meant at times to put them at odds with discourses from their home and communities. It also meant developing dual identities and learning to navigate sometimes contradictory demands, values and traditions. For these students the very changes that brought them closer to satisfying their goal of studying beyond high school also meant a series of losses: loss of some of their friends, some of their activities and family roles. The authors note that

While the development of new peer and reference group associations reinforced the college-going culture emphasized by teachers at the school, this development was not without costs. Like Richard Rodriquez, [these] students lamented the loss of previous associations even as they valued their new ones. (p. 41).

Other authors note that change can bring the loss of students, loss of agency, loss of language. For example, Green and Heras are concerned with the impact of policy changes and they carry out their analysis in terms of frame clashes. They discuss some of the recent changes in the educational policies in California regarding bilingual education and the English-only movement. Citing the work

of Gumperz and other well-known sociolinguists, they identified the origins of conflicting positions related to a policy change in terms of the involved social actors' histories and their "systems of social life". They also argue that different participants bring with them different logics and how different logics interact in different policy levels is consistent with how change is promoted, taken up or rejected, how changes in language use for a particular group of students. The changes in state guidelines for English Language Learners (ELL), "also resulted in changes in material resources for the group; that is, for all students and the teacher" (p. 161).

López-Bonilla's chapter deals with understanding the position of a young girl in Mexico who, despite her academic achievements, is unable to continue beyond high school even though for a long time her goal was to become a teacher. She examines how shifting educational and classroom practices aimed at supporting students work and learning often "position students in paradoxical and unexpected ways" (p. 75). In her analysis of "teamwork" in a Mexican public high school, she notes that "teamwork" has existed for some time in classrooms, but the latest reforms has redefined its meaning.

This curricular reform is part of a much larger international wave of innovations where a shift is being made from teacher-centered instruction to a student-centered curriculum in order to "diminish the status of knowledge structures, as well as the role of the teacher"... Although "teamwork" has been present in Mexican schools for many years, this last reform disrupted the dominant discourse of learning and instruction and has forced the agents involved (mainly teachers and students) to negotiate, conform to, and/or resist the positions this new discourse has afforded them. The balance between "teamwork" and individual activities shifted. For many teachers, "teamwork" has meant transferring the responsibility of learning curricular content solely to the students through "team research and collaboration," a discourse explicitly inscribed in curricular documents (pp. 77-78).

Change, in the chapters commented above, is at once loss, progress, regression, redefinition, and appropriation. In other chapters it is analyzed in terms of power (Carrasco and Kent), learning (Gee), culture (Tinajero-Villavivencio) and space (Perez- Fragoso). It occurs on the macro level of policy, and on the micro level of face to face interaction; in classrooms and in curriculum; in and out of school. This necessarily brief examination of its multiple meanings and impacts illustrates the depth of the discussions waiting for the reader. Change, rather than an absolute transformation from one absolute state to another is revealed as time consuming, conflictive, contradictory and gradual, often with having unplanned consequences and creating unforeseen burdens for those involved. In a society such as ours, where so much is wagered on educational success, these analyses provide needed insights into what goes on in the ever shifting context of schooling and education.

The chapters commented thus far deal not only with the local processes but also with more global dimensions of change, discourse and identity. One chapter in particular looks at education from another angle, where globalization has a direct effect on how scholars publish and evaluated. In her paper, *The Globalized World of English Scientific Publishing: An Analytical Proposal That Situates a Multilingual Scholar*, Englander examines one Mexican researcher's efforts to publish in a well-established English language journal in his field. The current policies for academic work and institutional evaluation in Mexico—influenced by globalization processes—heavily pressure scholars to send their papers to journals in other countries and in other languages. She notes that in Mexico publishing in Spanish language journals, despite their potential readership in Latin America and Spain, is not considered “positioned as global nor par with English-language journals (p. 217).” This adds an extra burden, for it requires scholars not only to study in an institution of higher learning and achieve a doctorate, but to be at least bi-literate or have the means for securing translations and revising them. Considering that the national average for schooling is still at about eight years none of these are small feats. In the case study that she presents, Englander found that while the researcher had several years of experience publishing, he had difficulties in understanding the discourse demands that the reviewers made of him. His

troubles were not with the content, not with the translation to English, and not with the academic requirements for a journal article; he had problems with the review process and balancing his desire to comply with what the anonymous readers asked him to do to his work and keeping his discursive identity intact.

This book raises compelling questions, questions about home language and culture and their place in formal schooling; about how to change and expand learning ideals; about classroom practices that support knowledge development in a highly stressed classroom setting, about the difference between academic rigor and discrimination in scientific disciplines, about what it means to learn to read and what we hope young readers will achieve. Future readers will find current reflections on important issues related to education and identity. While the chapters are highly situated in terms of the cases and the places they examine, they offer knowledgeable and insinuating discussions that scholars, teachers, and students will find inspiring for their own work.

About the editors of the book

Guadalupe López-Bonilla is a professor of literacy studies and discourse analysis at the Universidad Autónoma of Baja California, in Mexico. Her research focuses on high school students' literacy practices, inequality in education, and youths' identities. She is coauthor (with Alma Carrasco and Alicia Peredo) of *La lectura desde el currículo de educación básica y media superior en México* (2008) [Reading in Language Arts in the Mexican National K-12 Curriculum].

Karen Englander, Ph.D., is a professor at the Faculty of Languages in the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California. She has taught English-as-an-additional-language to teachers in Mexico, the U.S. and Canada. She has published in English and Spanish on issues of globalization, science writing and publishing, identity, and second language use.

About the reviewer

Judy Kalman is a researcher at the Departamento de Investigaciones Educativas (DIE) of the Centro de Investigación y Estudios Avanzados del IPN (CINVESTAV) in Mexico City. Her work centers on the social construction of literacy, everyday literacy use, reading and writing in school settings. She has authored articles in Spanish, English and Portuguese in academic research journals as well as practitioner oriented publications. She has also collaborated with the Secretaría de Educación Pública in Mexico on programs designed for creating learning opportunities for adult learners, evaluating new curricular proposals, and writing materials for the language arts programs for students in rural secondary schools. In 2002 she was the recipient for the International Literacy Research given by the Unesco Institute of Education for her literacy work with unschooled and under schooled women. She is a member of the Mexican Academy of Science since 2004. Her current work is centered on literacy and ICT technologies in and out of school. She currently runs the humanities and social science section of the Laboratorio de Educación, Tecnología y Sociedad, a working group she founded in her research department at CINVESTAV.

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