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Embodying Theory: A Loving Navigation of Linguistic Fingerprints

12/13/2018

We have fourteen weeks of theory resting between our ears. Throughout the semester, we've interrogated how language, culture, and race are theorized in the field of composition and rhetoric. Importantly, our understanding of these theories has not been developed in isolation. We did not read tucked away in the library or at our desks over our lunch breaks, only to sit and ponder these ideas in isolation. Each Thursday evening, we convened in a small simple room to talk, to question, to criticize, and to understand. We engaged in rhetoric to convey ideas and relied on literacies to understand our texts and each other. Through our linguistic repertoires, we engaged in a collaborative social process to develop our ideas. We navigated meanings, and hopefully, developed an attuned orientation towards the interaction of race, culture, and the practice of language.

This is where we are, shortly after our penultimate class meeting, in the moment that I sit down to converse with you about our experience. Our professor challenged us before our discussion, "What is theory?", and an underlying question rose to the surface, "How do we apply theory in practice?". These questions seemed to shape the conversation during the first half of our weekly gathering.

Echoing and enforcing our ongoing semester-long dialogue, we dug into the theory and practice of translingual approaches to literacy and writing. Drawing upon the words of [Bruce Horner](#), [Min-Zhan Lu](#), [Jacqueline Jones Royster](#), and [John Trimbur](#), one classmate oriented us towards a recurring theme from not only this week's readings, but also from across the semester. We were reminded that stances of openness towards language and literacy practice require us to view "language differences and fluidities as resources to be preserved, developed and utilized" (Horner et al., 2011, p. 304). This flexible view of language, taking a position that language is an inherently dynamic process rather than a static perfection, allows the space to ponder Horner et al.'s recognition that "we are all language learners" (p. 304). In class there was an acknowledgement that, for some, this is a profound perceptual change to the nature of language. What are the implications of this reoriented perspective, of engaging in what [A. Suresh Canagarajah](#) terms "linguistic pluralism"?

No longer is language a thing to be tamed, taught, and tested. Rather, it assumes mutable organic qualities we often associate with living beings; growing, changing, responding, and evolving. The translingual approach pushes this concept a bit further. Language cannot be wrangled into a singular truth--because core to its nature is difference. According to [Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner](#), "difference is the norm" (2013, p. 585). In class we pushed this theory towards practice by recognizing that there is not a singular way of speaking or writing. Linguistic practices are not monolithic, and we ought to keep this orientation at front of mind when we work with students. We must create environments where students can draw upon their personal linguistic repertoires not only to navigate, but also to co-create the contextual language practice in our learning spaces. An act Lu and Horner have cited as language sedimentation.

After discussing Jerry Won Lee's [Beyond Translingual Writing](#) we intentionally moved the conversation towards the practical application of translingual approaches. How can we make these ideas work for us and our students? Linguistic agency, the ability of language users to recognize and control their own practice and experience with language, can inform the way

we understand our student's language practices. We can assess linguistic agency by incorporating reflective writing into our curricula, and in conjunction, committing to engaging in dialogue with our students regarding their language production.

Even though we engaged in a rich and rigorous discussion, I still wonder about Won Lee's linguistic social justice, something we only briefly touched on. Or, what about the relationship between language practices and power dynamics? These might be theoretical questions for the next class to tackle.

It is imperative to note that there is no set of practices, no how-to guide, no tricks of the trade. The translingual approach, is an orientation, not a dogma. Therefore, it serves as a guide that ought to be thoughtfully and lovingly applied in our specific contexts. The embodiment of this orientation in our practice might create a space where students--each in possession of a unique linguistic finger print--can freely engage in the social nature of language, collaboratively constructing the norms of practice.

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