NEOS

Volume 16, Issue 1
Spring 2024

"Catching" Teaching and Learning for a New Cultural Normal

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What is "Culture"?

I have a love-hate relationship with the word "culture." As an educational anthropologist, I love how "culture" references people's complex and messy ways of being, believing, and behaving. As a multicultural teacher educator, I hate how "culture" reduces this complexity into tidy units of messaging about how certain people are a certain way. Textbooks used in teacher preparation, for example, carve up human experience into a litany – a recitation or recurring formula, quite literally -- of identity categories. That sense of "culture" *is* important in naming identities as vehicles through which power does its work of privilege and penalty. Understanding that sense of "culture" is part of developing what Villegas & Lucas call the sociocultural consciousness dimension of culturally-responsive teaching. Onto that sense layers the dimensions of affirming diverse identities and acting as agents of change. Together, these dimensions point to identities as part of a historical landscape of power configuration, one for which future educators need to be prepared as they step into teaching and learning spaces. But that sense of "culture," as identity, isn't enough. We also need to prepare educators to be attuned to the other sense of "culture," that of interactive processes, because it is through interactive processes that identities are mobilized for power's purposes. Future educators have a role to play in transforming these processes, but first, they need to be able to see themselves as reproducers, interrupters, or resisters of time-entrenched privileging or penalizing interactive patterns.

Understanding culture as an interactive process is, in fact, the contribution of anthropology to education. Anthropologists of education have traditionally studied cultural processes as part of transmission dynamics – What ways of being, believing, and behaving are passed from one generation to another, how, and to what effect? Transmission was central to George and Louise Spindler's (1990) thinking when they, the forebearers of educational anthropology, described "observing the cultural dialogue" as the primary practice of educational anthropologists. More recently, Ingold (2011), however, has argued that educational anthropology should focus on practices of attention that are central to human becoming and, by extension, freedom. His anthropology as a "science of correspondence" (p. 70) should, he says, explore how entities co-respond to one another and, in doing so, (re)make themselves and the world. Ingold's re-framing has advantages for the uptake of educational anthropology in educator preparation. Most educators in training don't have the luxury of a multi-generational context and perspective in which to analyze transmission aptly. What they usually do have are field experiences in schools or community-based organizations. These provide important opportunities to practice noticing processes of attention, or co-respondence, in the educator-learner relationship. The challenge is

helping educators in training expand their sense of culture beyond the bounded identity categories through which they have been taught, in and out of school, to recognize it and, instead, understand culture as inter-activity.

This sense of culture underlies another dimension of Villegas & Lucas' articulation of culturally-responsive teaching -- constructivist orientations to knowledge, teaching, learning, and schooling. This dimension references the idea that the world, specifically the world of school, is the way it is because human beings have made it so (not some natural or divine order). This is where I have learned my students, future teachers, really struggle. They may grasp, conceptually, that what we understand as right or wrong thinking is arbitrary, along with the institutional policies and practices we organize to transmit that to the next generation, but they have a hard time applying that understanding in the concrete. For this purpose, we need to give them a new norm for culture, a new cultural normal. I set out to create something to aid them in conceiving of culture as interlocking interactive processes of which they could imagine themselves and their future students as having liberatory potential. I ended up with something that is itself interactive – the Grounded Knowing Culture Catcher.

Why "Grounded Knowing"?

I do my educational anthropology work in science. I encountered the phrase "grounded knowing" as a description of the work of an environmental watershed project involving the diverse positionalities and perspectives of scientists, farmers, government officials, and environmentalists (Ashwood, Harden, Bell, & Bland, 2014). They sought not to name the differences between "everyday" and "specialized" science but to situate, link, and, in their words, "ground" the knowing processes defining and animating the experience and evolution of their, in this way, radically collaborative work. It's about more than acquisition and it's about more than mere participation. "Grounded Knowing" extends the acquisition and participation metaphors, as Sfard (1998) has offered them, for teaching and learning. At the heart of this Grounded Knowing principle is the idea that everyone's thinking makes a contribution. The principle of Contribution acknowledges, affirms, and activates a state of inter-connectedness between the people, place, process, purpose, product, and possibility of actors in an educational context. As Stetsenko (2008) has argued, the principle of Contribution takes the Vygotskian emphasis on the sociocultural context of teaching and learning into a transformative and activist position. In this way, it grounds knowing differently.

"Catching" Culture as Contribution

I wanted to translate Grounded Knowing into a pedagogical premise that the future teachers I work with could understand. I wanted to create a heuristic, a conceptual tool, to help them internalize the idea of interactive processes at the heart of the sense of culture I love. But since the idea itself of a heuristic atomizes knowledge – which is part of the old cultural normal that grounded knowing

seeks to resist and replace – the challenge was how to present a model of Grounded Knowing that wasn't atomistic in its representation. This required a format that wasn't flat and static but moved and interacted in a way suggesting dynamism and multiplicity and novelty reflective of the idea of co-respondence. The result was a tool, that, perhaps fittingly, takes an object iconic to school culture, the proverbial "cootie catcher," and re-sources it for reconstructive purposes, as a "culture catcher" (Figure 1, attached).

Here's how I made it:

I adapted the table Stetskeno created in which she expands Sfard's Acquisition and Participation metaphors to the metaphor of Contribution. In that table, Stetsenko compares the Acquisition, Participation, and Contribution metaphors across key ideas such as the following, What We Understand Learning To Be, Where We Understand Learning To Take Place, What We Understand The Learner To Do, What We Understand The Educator To Do, What We Understand The Curriculum To Do, How We Understand Instruction To Occur, How We Understand The Role Of Family and Community, and What We Take as Evidence Of Learning. For example, in terms of what we understand learning to be, the Acquisition metaphor of development and learning invests in learning as information processing "in the head." The Participation metaphor invests in learning as being part of communities of practice. The Contribution metaphor of learning invests in learning as transformative collaboration. I then added to this table four additional columns representing central themes I have distilled down over my teacher education experience. I use theme-driven questions to encourage my students to think through their educational practice, generally, and shift them toward learning as Contribution, more specifically:

Intention: What the educator plans to do with students -- the goal to which they set the collective, collaborative, contributive learning purpose.

Interaction: How the educator enables interaction as and for intentional learning as a contribution.

Responsiveness: How the educator's intention and interaction for learning reflects youth and community interests, concerns, questions, and needs for change; how the students relate to the learning purpose and understand their role as contribution; and

Receptiveness: How the educator understands and encourages student learning as adapting to, altering, and advancing the learning purpose; the extent to which the learning purpose is limited by or expands upon its original intention through student contribution and is both transformed and transformational.

I associated each of these four themes with key ideas from the adapted metaphors table. Returning to the previous example, I associated What We Understand Learning To Be, What

We Understand The Curriculum To Do, and How We Understand Instruction To Occur, with the theme of Intention because these ideas guide the planning process, which manifests the educator's intentions. These kinds of associations shaped the arrangement reflected in the Grounded Knowing Culture Catcher.

The Grounded Knowing Heuristic

The Grounded Knowing Culture Catcher heuristic tool facilitates conversation about the principles and practices of grounded knowing or learning as Contribution (contribution is what the C in the center stands for). It assists them in having that conversation in a way that is not fixed, like table, but more flexible. Once folded, future educators can enter the tool through each of the four Intention, Interaction, Responsiveness, and Reception corners. Each corner reveals further extending options the developing educator can pursue in thinking about the principles and goals for practices associated with that theme and idea. For example, if you enter through or "tap" (as we used to do when using the "cootie catcher" on the playground) the Intention corner, you will find under that flap Definition of Learning and Curriculum & Approach to Instruction. If you lift those flaps, you will find Transformative Collaboration (as the definition of learning) and Emergent Human Development (as a curricular and instructional goal). Importantly, in using the tool, the corners touch each other in different ways. When wearing the tool, move your fingers one way and Intention and Reception are linked. At the next level of this linkage, Curriculum & Approach to Instruction and Demonstration of Learning are linked, and at the next level, the linkage is between Emergent Human Development and Transformative Transfer of Knowledge. This creates an opportunity for future teachers to have a conversation about in what ways they think about human development when they are making curricular and instructional decisions and to what extent they center this in their Intentions. Move your fingers another way, and Reception and Responsiveness are linked, creating conversation opportunities around Demonstration of Learning (what they conceive of as evidence, associated at the next level with Transformative Transfer of Knowledge) and Role of Community (understood, at the next level, as an Integral Resource).

In this way, the Grounded Knowing Culture Catcher is a physical suggestion of interactive processes at the heart of education that assists future educators in taking up a sense of culture that goes beyond identity. It can be used to prompt connections between broader concepts and the concrete practices and policies they've experienced in their own schooling or professionalization experiences that they may otherwise be taking for granted (for example, learning-as-Acquisition-driven scripted curriculum) as just the "way it is." Most importantly, they can use the tool to plan around learning-as-Contribution, to observe for Contribution, to ground Grounded Knowing as part of their teaching philosophy. Gaining a new sense of culture as co-respondence, teachers find the freedom in their roles as they recognize it in and rally around it for their students'.

As you move into the articles of this special issue on Building Blocks of Knowledge: Investigating Education, Learning, and Knowing in Children and Youth, I invite you to consider how the authors and the young people with whom they work in school spaces and beyond, collectively construe the Intention, Interaction, Reception, and Responsiveness of their efforts. How are those efforts guided by a sense of culture in, as, and for learning not bound to static identity but fueled by catalytic Contribution? I hope that, whether educational anthropologist or not, or lover or hater of "culture" or not, for scholars of education like you, the Grounded Knowing Heuristic invites a new cultural normal, one of paying attention to, of noticing and naming, the co-respondence of children, youth and adults, in the myriads of mutually emergent processes of becoming human, together.

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Cite this article: Bruna, Katherine Richardson. 2024. "'Catching' Teaching and Learning for a New Cultural Normal." *NEOS* (16) 1.

Link this article: https://acyig.americananthro.org/neosvol16iss1spring24/bruna/

Figure 1

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