

***Decolonizing Literacy: Mexican Lives in the Era of Global Capitalism***

Gregorio Hernandez-Zamora

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Frustrated with standardized tests and basic skills curriculums that define literacy as an exercise in correctly filling in the right bubble, I found *Decolonizing Literacy* to be an expansive reconception of what constitutes literacy and language learning. Through his case study of marginalized Mexicans, Hernandez-Zamora argues persuasively that their literacy development was less connected to formal education or literacy competencies but rather to access -- access to new ideas and ways of thinking, to mentors, communities and opportunities, and most importantly to freedom over their own lives. This book raises challenging and provocative questions, particularly for ESL teachers like myself who teach marginalized immigrants. What role, if any, do adult schools have in helping learners become literate? How do oppressive forces affect the literacy practices of our students? How can our teaching practice position our students as powerful agents in relation to their learning and literacy practices?

As the title of his book suggests, Hernandez-Zamora examines literacy through the lens of colonization and its historical consequences, but from the beginning he establishes a close, personal and political connection to his research. A scholar and professor of education with a PhD from UC Berkeley, Hernandez-Zamora states that he was born and raised in a shanty town on the outskirts of Mexico City. This unique background provides him with both an insider (personal) and outsider (academic) perspective on his subjects' lives. And it is the way that he interweaves these two perspectives and two discourses that helps make his writing so fascinating and readable.

In the first two chapters Hernandez-Zamora uses decolonizing theory and social-cultural theories of learning to introduce his theoretical approach, which he illuminates with the words and lives of his subjects, and, occasionally, with details and knowledge from his own life as well. He draws heavily from a standard line of critical pedagogists, but it's the works of Mikhail Bakhtin and Lev

Vygotsky that contribute the most to his analysis. He uses Bakhtin to highlight the way some of his subjects are able to appropriate literacy in order to “self-position themselves ... as learners, citizens and human beings” with a corresponding transformation of identity and agency. Complementary to this process of self-authoring is access, and he cites Vygotsky in arguing that his most empowered subjects also needed to enter into “literate dialogues, communities, and practices” that gave them access to powerful discourses and counter-discourses to resist colonizing forces that re-enforce their marginalized positions.

Despite their lack of formal education, all of his subjects carry out literacy demands in their daily lives. The key distinction for Hernandez-Zamora is that some are agents and others are survivors. The agents are those who engage in literacy practices that resist colonizing forces, while the survivors primarily engage in literacy practices that re-enforce their marginalized positions. It is precisely the voices and stories of these individuals along with Hernandez-Zamora's analysis that make up the heart of the book.

So, what's the point of finishing middle or high school? No, we would rather document ourselves...which is what allows us to make our work concrete. We avoid the problem of spending time 'studying' and 'studying', and at the end DOING NOTHING... We're better off DOING something.

- Chela

Hernandez-Zamora contends that the out-of-school discourse practices that his subjects acquired supported their literacy development and helped them move ahead. Though most of his subjects report negative experiences with formal schools, it is primarily the agents, such as Chela cited above, who take critical stances toward schooling. Sofia, with a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade education, illustrates this point. She describes her limited experience in adult classes as “listening to the teacher in front of the blackboard, doing textbook exercises and taking tests.” Yet her entire life has been a blueprint for action. Hernandez-Zamora details her life as an activist, member of a church group, and member of a natural healers group. She reads sophisticated materials on herbal plants and discusses them with her group. The relationship and investment she has with her reading materials stands in stark contrast to the

relationship that many beginning ESL students have with the basic reading materials used in their classes. Her engagement with her reading materials is literally doing something, while class engagement so often becomes an exercise for learning that does not lead to anything outside the classroom.

I read Contenido [Readers' Digest type magazine]; I love reading the tragic stories that are in there...and I think; “hopefully I find the courage to do the same to this asshole [her husband]” But look, I just read and I start crying.

- Paula

Another distinguishing factor among his subjects is the degree to which they have appropriated powerful discourses and counter discourses. Hernandez-Zamora argues persuasively that it was Sofia's participation in community organizations (as an activist, healer, and church member) that brought her into social dialogues and exposed her to critical philosophies that counter hegemonic cultural discourses and traditions such as submitting to an abusive husband. These discourses stand in marked contrast to Paula, cited above, who reads her life like a telenovela. Her reading practice serves as a form of escape and refuge reaffirming her social status. Unlike Sofia, who left an abusive husband, Paula remains with hers. While Paula's reading of romance fiction would seem to indicate her developing literacy skill, her reading practice still positions her as a passive victim, much in the same way that the traditional adult basic skills classroom can position marginalized adults as failed learners and illiterates.

Through their life histories and voices, these individuals in Hernandez-Zamora's book vividly demonstrate how “the freedom to act, speak, act, and make decisions about their lives” is the real driving force behind learning and using literacy – whether it's organizing, starting your own business, participating in a religion, or making the decision to come to the U.S. Their stories recall the late Gail Weinstein's words, “Immigrant learners don't need survival English, they've been surviving since they first got here.” Hernandez-Zamora's book is a reminder and a challenge to us that classroom teaching must encompass more than just words on paper; it must connect to the hopes, dreams and inspirations

that live within our students.