



6. Community as a Campus: From “Problems” to Possibilities in Latinx Communities

JONATHAN ROSA

The language practices of U.S. Latinxs¹ are frequently viewed as educational impediments, particularly in light of this population’s rapid demographic rise in recent decades.² In Milltown,³ a small, urban New England city in which Latinxs constitute nearly 80% of K-12 students, popular discourses often link educational underachievement to cultural and linguistic diversity. For example, a recent local news story touting improving graduation rates throughout the region includes the following discussion of ongoing educational difficulties in Milltown:

Milltown again was among the lowest in the state despite a high school graduation rate that improved slightly, to 53.8 % from the previous year’s 52.8%. The city of 40,000 is roughly half Hispanic. Among challenges, officials have said, is that English is not the first language for more than 70% of public school students.

Perspectives such the one voiced in this media portrayal present language differences, specifically those associated with “Hispanic” students for whom English is not their “first language,”⁴ as problems to be overcome rather than legitimate forms of communication. This vantage point involves language ideologies that presume upon English language “proficiency”⁵ as a readymade pathway toward educational success. Yet this is not the case for millions of U.S. Latinxs, as well members of other minoritized⁶ populations, who identify as native English speakers and still face profound experiences of educational inequity. In Milltown, Latinx language use is positioned as an impediment and scapegoated as the cause of educational underachievement,

despite the fact that from the perspective of normative linguistic logics many Latinx residents' bilingual linguistic repertoires could be viewed as more expansive than those of the monolingual teachers, administrators, and policy makers who seek to fix them. As one Milltown-based Latinx poet put it, "This city is allergic to Spanish." This linguistic stigmatization naturalizes prevailing conceptions of educational underachievement as well as broader forms of societal exclusion across a range of mainstream institutional settings. Efforts toward denaturalizing these ideas must redirect attention from modifying the practices of marginalized populations to contesting the structures of power through which their communities are systematically stigmatized.

In this chapter, I point to the exciting possibilities that emerge when we shift from viewing marginalized communities as static objects of academic analysis to dynamic sites of collaborative knowledge production. In order to do so, I describe the development of a collaborative civic engagement project that brought together my students in an undergraduate Latinx Studies course with a teacher and students in a predominantly Latinx high school. In this project, titled VOCES (Voicing Our Community in English and Spanish), the high school teacher and I worked collaboratively as co-instructors and the university students and high school students worked collaboratively as co-learners. The goal of the project was to learn ethnographic research skills to document, analyze, and contest the stigmatization of language practices in a predominantly Latinx community where linguistic diversity is often viewed as a problem from mainstream perspectives. By approaching this community as a campus, the students and teachers were able to work together to present an alternative view of a stigmatized community that challenged the institutional reproduction of disparities, while also demonstrating the resilience and ingenuity of its residents.

Conceptualizing and Approaching Communities as Campuses

In this section I document how the VOCES project in Milltown was informed by previous work in other predominantly Latinx communities and educational settings. Specifically, I describe the Chicago-based development of the Community as a Campus model, as well as my efforts to synthesize it with inside-out and culturally sustaining pedagogies, Community-Based Participatory Research and Youth Participatory Action Research approaches, and a commitment to sociolinguistic justice. This combination of theories, pedagogies, methodologies, and ethical commitments provided a robust toolkit for the VOCES project. The Community as a Campus model was developed by Chicago's Puerto Rican Cultural Center.⁷ The guiding ethos of Community

as a Campus is a social ecological perspective that views communities not as passive objects of inquiry but rather as dynamic contexts in which residents are constantly producing, circulating, and redefining knowledge.

While teaching a civics course in Chicago's Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School, which was founded by the Puerto Rican Cultural Center more than forty years ago, I experienced firsthand the power of Community as a Campus. Rather than structuring the school as an atomized institution that is isolated from the rest of the community, the entire curriculum is framed around culturally sustaining pedagogies⁸ that draw from, respond to, and engage with everyday life in the surrounding community. Classrooms are situated in the school's main building as well as in storefronts, so that students walk throughout the community as they move from class to class. Coursework in traditional subjects is reimagined in relation to the mathematics of spatially designing and budgeting for community events; the science of greening the community's rooftops and understanding a local diabetes epidemic; the social studies of gentrification, food deserts, and colonialism; and the arts and literature of hip hop, community members' oral histories, and vernacular expressive practices. This curricular approach integrates not only disparate academic subjects, but also differing community institutions and residents. By enacting this Community as a Campus model, communities that are often highly stigmatized come to be experienced as powerful sites of knowledge production. Rather than embracing a vision of educational success in which escaping marginalized communities is the goal, Community as a Campus involves reimagining and recreating these communities.

The Community as a Campus model corresponds to Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) approaches, which center on partnerships with community members—specifically youth—in all stages of the research process, from the development of research questions, to data collection, analysis, and the dissemination of findings. Importantly, these approaches have an “explicitly political and action focus” that distinguishes them from other research that might be situated within communities but not explicitly grounded within communities' efforts toward addressing the inequities they face (Atalay, 2012, p. 50). Within the discipline of anthropology, CBPR has been presented as an attempt to “combine Indigenous systems of knowledge and traditional ways of understanding with those of Western science ... to work cooperatively—to use the diverse knowledge of all to build strength on the path to mutual success and peace” (Atalay, 2012, p. x). Thus, CBPR centers mutuality and justice in questions about “what knowledge is produced, by whom, for whose interest, and toward what ends” (Atalay, 2012, p. 59). Relatedly, education scholars and

other youth-focused researchers have formulated YPAR as an approach that “provides young people with opportunities to study social problems affecting their lives and then determine actions to rectify these problems” (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 2). Thus, CBPR and YPAR provide frameworks for revolutionizing the production, circulation, and reception of knowledge.

When I became a faculty member at an institution near Milltown, I began adapting these various approaches in my community-based teaching and research. A central component of this effort involved familiarizing myself with the educational and cultural terrain within Milltown’s predominantly Puerto Rican community. I served as an apprentice under the guidance of a senior colleague with extensive community-based teaching and learning experience in Milltown. This colleague introduced me to a model of teaching and learning based on the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, in which university students and incarcerated populations study together as co-learners (Allred, 2009; Pompa, 2005). Bringing together people in differing social circumstances as co-teachers and co-learners, this transformative approach challenges traditional community-based learning models that position university students as knowledge holders or service providers and community members as recipients of their assistance. By positioning university students and community members as co-learners, they become collaborators in the production of knowledge.

In this particular instance, my colleague and mentor was working with an Adult Basic Education program in Milltown. I attended this colleague’s class weekly in order to learn how they collaborated with one of this program’s instructors as a co-teacher and how their students collaborated as co-learners. By challenging traditional hierarchies associated with teaching and learning, this class became a transformative experience for all of the participants. Similar to the Community as a Campus model and CBPR/YPAR approaches, university students and faculty were not simply extracting information from a marginalized community to bring back to the academy, but rather collaborating with community members as co-learners and co-researchers to understand and address the inequities they face.

This work inspired me to adapt one of my courses, Languages and Latinxs, into a community-based research practicum. In this language-oriented practicum, I sought to synthesize the aforementioned approaches with a commitment to “sociolinguistic justice,” which has been defined as “self-determination for linguistically subordinated individuals and groups in sociopolitical struggles over language” (Bucholtz et al., 2014, p. 145; Fishman, 2010; Wolfram, 2001). Scholarly efforts in support of sociolinguistic justice combine longstanding theoretical deconstructions of deficit-based

perspectives on linguistic diversity, with reciprocal methodologies that seek to avoid the pitfalls associated with speaking on behalf of research participants rather than empowering them to advocate for themselves (Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, & Richardson, 1992; Labov, 1969; Wolfram, Adger, & Christian, 2007; Zentella, 1997, 2005). In the context of a collaboration with linguistically marginalized youth, teaching informed by sociolinguistic justice exemplifies what education scholars have described as culturally sustaining pedagogies, whose practitioners ask, “what if, indeed, the goal of teaching and learning with youth of color was not ultimately to see how closely students could perform White middle-class norms, but to explore, honor, extend, and, at times, problematize their heritage and community practices?” (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 86). This question was at the center of the community-based VOCES project, which I describe in the following section.

The VOCES Project: Voicing Our Community in English and Spanish

After obtaining funding for a collaborative university-community research practicum to train undergraduate students and high school students as linguistic ethnographers, I began meeting with potential participating teachers and students. I selected six undergraduate students with bilingual English-Spanish skills and extensive community-based learning experience. I also identified a Spanish teacher at the high school with whom to partner, and delivered presentations in several of her classes in an effort to recruit high school student participants. High school students filled out applications and obtained parental consent to participate in the project. The teacher and I reviewed the applications and selected fifteen high school students. My undergraduate students and I met one day a week to discuss readings and plan for our meetings in Milltown, and one day a week in Milltown for two and a half hours to conduct the practicum with the high school students and teacher. The goal was to develop skills not only for documenting and analyzing linguistic practices and identities, but also to identify linguistic inequities and propose interventions.

During our initial meetings, we discussed the history of Milltown, particularly the political and economic dynamics that have produced stark structural inequities through which Latinxs are marginalized across a range of societal domains, including public schools, employment, housing, and city governance. We analyzed the ways that the Puerto Rican migration to Milltown during the mid to late 20th century coincided with the decline of industry, namely paper manufacturing, which had allowed previous (im)migrant

groups, such as Irish, German, Polish, and French Canadians, to experience upward socioeconomic mobility and societal inclusion across generations. We examined “culture of poverty” (Lewis, 1966) narratives that obscure these political and economic histories by attributing Puerto Rican marginalization to cultural pathology rather than structural inequity. We also considered the ways that, unlike previous (im)migrant groups, Puerto Rico’s colonial history vis-à-vis the United States racialized Puerto Rican migrants as non-White second-class citizens. We connected these dialogues to language by discussing how, in the post-Civil Rights era, race and racism have been remapped from biology onto language and culture (Urciuoli, 2001). Through this remapping, racism is less frequently articulated in relation to presumed biological inferiority, as it was in previous historical moments. Instead, purported linguistic and cultural pathologies have become prime targets for the expression of racial animosity. Thus, language practices and ideologies can provide important vantage points from which to understand how racial inequity is (re)produced and experienced.

Based on these preliminary discussions, we developed a set of research questions about language practices and ideologies in Milltown: (1) How are the English and Spanish languages positioned in relation to one another in different settings? (2) How does language use become a symbol of identity? (3) What stereotypes are associated with the English and Spanish languages? (4) What are the different varieties of English and Spanish that people use and with whom do they use which variety? (5) How is language related to inequity and social justice? Based on these interests and questions, we named our research project “Voicing our Community in English and Spanish” (VOCES). Each university student partnered with two or three high school students and decided to focus on a particular research topic/methodology: (a) linguistic landscape; (b) ethnography of language; (c) oral history; (d) language policy; (e) slang; and (f) social media.

The linguistic landscape group focused on documenting and analyzing the range of visual displays of language use in public, such as signs, advertisements, and graffiti, with which they came into contact in their everyday lives (Shohamy & Gorter, 2009). Students in this group drew on Photovoice research methodologies, which involved using cameras to document the linguistic landscape and then conducting follow-up interviews and recording sessions in which they commented on the significance of visual data that they collected (Gubrium & Harper, 2013). This group discovered that while neutral informational signs, such as directions to the school’s main office, were displayed in standardized English and Spanish, posters and signs with important information about college were displayed exclusively in standardized

English. Meanwhile, punitive signs warning students about the prohibition of particular behaviors, such as signs posted in front the school that state *NO HANGEO* (a nonstandardized way of writing “no loitering”),⁹ were displayed exclusively in nonstandardized Spanish. In community settings, such as the public library, students found signs that were bilingual in English and Spanish, yet the Spanish translations were often nonstandardized or appeared in a smaller font below the much larger, standardized English characters. In the predominantly Puerto Rican downtown area, there were many signs exclusively in Spanish. Thus, this group concluded that Milltown’s linguistic landscape reflects the marginalization of the Spanish language and its users, while also noting that exclusively English or Spanish signage in different areas indexed segregation throughout Milltown.

The ethnography of communication group analyzed language use in particular community contexts (e.g., corner stores, barbershop/beauty shops, churches, malls, etc.). They documented the linguistic and cultural symbols and practices associated with these contexts from both in-group and out-group perspectives, and also analyzed the relationship between language ideologies and linguistic practices associated with these contexts. The group decided to focus specifically on language use within different retail settings in Milltown. They found stark contrasts between language use within the Milltown Mall, a mainstream commercial setting, and downtown Milltown, where Puerto Ricans predominate. They conducted an experiment in which they entered stores, wait to be greeted by an employee, and then respond to English language greetings in Spanish or Spanish language greetings in English. In the Milltown Mall, they were greeted in English in every store. Roughly half of the employees ignored them when they responded in Spanish; they classified approximately 20% of their interactions as successfully bilingual.

This group discovered that while the clientele of Milltown Mall is racially and linguistically diverse and there is some bilingual signage throughout the mall, the vast majority of employees are white, monolingual English speakers. In contrast, in downtown Milltown, they were greeted in Spanish in the majority of stores they entered, and every employee who greeted them in Spanish switched to English when the students responded in English. They concluded that while Spanish might be the default language in downtown Milltown, there is widespread bilingualism not only in signage, but also among employees and patrons. By observing and comparing linguistic dynamics in these two ethnographic settings, the students were able to document the inequitable ways in which English monolingualism becomes privileged within particular settings, as well as the ways in which bilingualism and Spanish language use are devalued or stigmatized.

The oral history group analyzed interviews that all of the program participants conducted with their immediate and extended families in order to learn about their linguistic heritage and identify local language ideologies. Interviews were conducted in English, Spanish, or a combination thereof. After conducting the interviews, students in this group compared their findings with one another to identify similarities and differences in linguistic heritage and language ideologies. One fascinating pattern that emerged within the interviews was that the majority of them were asymmetrically bilingual, with the student interviewers speaking English and the family respondents speaking Spanish. This is demonstrated in the following excerpt from an interview between Daniel, a Puerto Rican sophomore, and his mother (brackets signal overlapping speech and equal signs signal interruption):

D: Um, what's your primary language?

M: Mi lenguaje primario es inglés, [pero

(My primary language is English, [but)

D: [Can, oh

D: Can you elaborate on that, like=

M: =Es que, yo hablo inglés porque en la escuela yo (It's that, I speak English because in school I

hablo inglés [y con mis amigos yo hablo speak English [and with my friends I speak)

D: [Oh, when you were younger

M: Sí, y con mis amigos yo hablo inglés, pero con familia yo hablo en español.

(Yes, and with my friends I speak English, but with family I speak in Spanish.)

D: That's good, mom.

Interestingly, when Daniel asks his mother in English what her primary language is, she responds in Spanish by telling him that her primary language is English. In their analysis of these data, the oral history group concluded that complex linguistic repertoires within Milltown challenge assumptions about relationships between language and identity. They also found that despite the linguistic and racial stigmatization that interviewees reported experiencing in Milltown, they continue to be proud both of their Milltown and Latinx identities, as well as their English-Spanish bilingualism.

The language policy group analyzed policies at the local, state, and national levels. These included policies associated with bilingual education,

voting rights, courts, citizenship, and medical contexts. They researched the views of advocates or opponents of these policies and identified the language ideologies associated with each of these positions. The group focused specifically on a 2002 English-only ballot initiative in Massachusetts. The initiative replaced Transitional Bilingual Education with Sheltered or Structured English Immersion, effectively making English the sole language of instruction for all K-12 students. They found that while 68% of voters approved this eradication of Transitional Bilingual Education, 92% of Latinxs voted against this initiative. They also found that this initiative was overwhelmingly rejected within Milltown's predominantly Latinx precincts. After discovering the ways that language policies often marginalize languages other than English and their users, the students worked together to draft language policies that reflect a more inclusive view of language in society. Specifically, they advocated for a dual-language curriculum in Milltown's K-12 schools, and the requirement of Spanish-English bilingualism for all district teachers and administrators.

The slang group studied peer language use, with a focus on what students understand as examples of slang. Each time they identified a slang usage, they documented specific examples of these usages and followed up with linguistic elicitations in which they asked peers to define these usages and to provide different examples of how they are used. They compiled these usages into a slang dictionary. One of the most compelling examples of Milltown-based vernacular language use that they discovered was the term "lingy" (singular)/"lingys" (plural). This term is used pejoratively by students who identify as monolingual English users or English dominant to refer to students they view as monolingual Spanish users or Spanish dominant. Ironically, while *lingy/lingys* is local shorthand for bilingual, many of the Latinx students who use this term might be more conventionally categorized as bilingual than the Spanish dominant students they use the term to deride. The slang group used this and other examples to analyze social networks and hierarchies within the school, and to consider how certain language use comes to be viewed as more or less correct and legitimate.

The social media group documented and analyzed the particular ways that digital communicative platforms are used throughout Milltown, as well as the ways in which Milltown is represented these platforms. They investigated the vernacular cultures and communicative logics involved in the use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, Yelp, and Vine (Coleman, 2010). One recurring theme in social media was the notion that Milltown is "little Puerto Rico." Many social media users joked that the bridge into Milltown is "the longest bridge in the world—from America to Puerto Rico." Others referenced language issues, such as one

person who wrote: “Just told a rude ass lady who didn’t speak a lick of English to go fuck herself in Spanish. Thank you, Milltown high lingys.” This example demonstrates the ways that themes overlapped across the different student research groups. For example, when the slang group discovered the term *lingy*, the social media group was able to help them find examples. The group used these examples in order to analyze the ways that social media platforms become sites for performances of identity that might not be viewed as legitimate in offline settings. They concluded that such digital presentations of self play a key role in circulating ideas about language and identity in Milltown.

Each group of students wrote a final report and presented their findings to one another. Their reports and presentations were shared with the superintendent of schools, as well as with a group of teachers who were working to develop more culturally responsive curricula. Collectively, the students acquired a range of skills through their participation in this project, including methods for collecting, analyzing, presenting, and applying social science research data. More importantly, they developed new perspectives on their own linguistic identities and ideologies. The university students were able to enhance and apply the knowledge they acquired throughout their undergraduate careers by teaching and learning with high school students. The high school students were provided with access to college-level curricula, developed academic relationships with undergraduate college students, and discovered that their lived experiences constituted important forms of knowledge. The high school teacher had the opportunity to develop and co-teach a college course and I, as the university instructor, learned new pedagogical strategies for working with hybrid university-community educational settings. Thus, the VOCES project truly demonstrated the Community as a Campus model’s potential to create transformative academic experiences for everyone involved.

Conclusion

By approaching Latinx communities not simply as test sites for academic study but rather as important intellectual collaborators, we dramatically enhance our capacity to create scholarship that identifies, analyzes, and contributes to the eradication of contemporary inequities. Community as a Campus is a powerful model for doing so. This model involves reimagining the places where learning takes place, the participants in learning processes, the pedagogies that facilitate learning, the practices associated with learning, and the paradigms that structure ideas about learning. It reimagines places where learning takes place by viewing communities as contexts in which legitimate

knowledge is cultivated and created. It reimagines the participants in learning processes by positioning community members as legitimate teachers and researchers. It reimagines the pedagogies through which learning takes place by rooting educational experiences in culturally responsive curricula. It reimagines the practices associated with learning by not simply passively observing existing realities but seeking to understand, analyze, and transform those realities. Lastly, it reimagines the paradigms that structure ideas about learning by drawing on and synthesizing skills from across academic disciplines that are too often separated. The VOCES project described in this chapter is just one example of an effort to implement the Community as a Campus model. It is exciting to envision the educational possibilities that might arise from other such efforts.

Notes

1. Throughout this chapter I use the term Latinx as a gender non-binary alternative to Latina, Latino, and Latin@, in reference to U.S.-based persons of Latin American descent. I also use the alternative term Hispanic when referencing direct quotations.
2. Rodríguez-Muñiz (2015) cautions against viewing demographic predictions as straightforward reflections of empirical population shifts. Instead, he argues that we must attend to the performativity of statistics and the ways that they structure both popular anxieties and Latinx political organizing.
3. Pseudonyms are used for the city and school to protect anonymity.
4. It is crucial to reconsider the ways that categories such as first language and native speaker reproduce troublesome ideas about linguistic boundaries and proficiencies. Bonfiglio (2010), García and Torres-Guevara (2010), Makoni and Pennycook (2007), and others have critiqued these language ideologies at length.
5. Like the phrase “native language,” it is important to understand “proficiency” as a situated ideological and institutional perception rather than an objective linguistic assessment (Rosa & Flores, 2017).
6. I use the term “minoritized” rather than “minority” to emphasize processes of marginalization instead of demographic calculations. This distinction draws attention to the ways that many populations and practices actually predominate within a given context yet are still characterized as “minority.”
7. For a more in-depth description of the development and implementation of the Community as a Campus model in Chicago, see <http://www.humboldtparkportal.org/news/2613> and <https://greatcities.uic.edu/uic-neighborhoods-initiative/humboldt-park-initiative/>.
8. Paris (2012) and Paris and Alim (2014) argue that we must build from asset-based pedagogies that view minoritized students’ practices as useful starting points to enact culturally sustaining pedagogies that seek to disrupt racial and cultural hegemonies within mainstream schools. Rosa and Flores (2017) analyze the ways that these culturally sustaining approaches are particularly relevant in relation to Latinx students and their linguistic practices.

9. *NO HANGEO* is an iteration of the slang verb *janguear* (to hang out) but in standardized written Spanish it would be spelled with a “j” instead of an “h,” a “u” between “g” and “e,” and presented in the infinitival form *No Janguear* or the negative command form *No Janguée*.

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