CHAPTER 4

Multiliteracies and Multilingualism in Action

An Intergenerational Inquiry Through a Poetry Translation Program

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In this chapter, we explore the ongoing relevance of the original New London Group's (NLG) ideas related to multiliteracies and their design metalanguage, as well as their pedagogical implications, through an examination of the innovative literacy program *Poetry Inside Out*. Our research team was comprised of university faculty, a group of youth researchers (high school seniors in one of the poorest secondary schools in MA), and undergraduate researchers. We focus in particular on the impact of this program on bilingual youth (what they learn about themselves and others), and the perspective they provide as researchers from the inside out. We hope to demonstrate the power and viability of youth-centered multiliteracies research as a means of engaging youth as well as adult researchers in the design of meaning, knowledge, and more inclusive social futures.

FROM THE NEW LONDON GROUP TO *POETRY INSIDE OUT*

In 1996, a group of diversely positioned researchers and educators came together to propose a new vision for literacy pedagogy "in which language and other modes of meaning are dynamic representational resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve their various cultural purposes" (New London Group, p. 64). In 2015, another group came together, drawing on different languages, perspectives, and social locations, and similarly interested in understanding the possibilities for transformative multiliteracies pedagogy. In this group, we were an intergenerational constellation of scholars: a

senior researcher who was a member of the NLG, a junior scholar of literacy, an undergraduate studying linguistics and education, and five bilingual high school students who participated in an innovative multiliteracies-aligned curriculum in their school.

We spent the last two years together as an intergenerational group of practitioner-inquirers, working to document and theorize the nature and impact of an innovative multiliteracies-aligned program. The program is known as *Poetry Inside Out* (PIO), developed at the Center for the Art of Translation in San Francisco (http://www.catranslation.org). In PIO, participants translate poems from around the world into English from their original language (e.g., Spanish, Chinese). Students work with a partner and then in groups of four to discuss their translations and eventually they create their original poems for publication, often in their home language and in English.

In our research group, we produced new knowledge about PIO, and also developed a culture of productive talk that supported us in critically framing and transforming ideas about literacies, language, youth, and even research itself. Through a co-created data collection and analysis process, we developed five key themes that explain the "how" and "what" of PIO for bilingual high school youth. We theorized how PIO recruits students' conceptions of available designs, expands their multiple literacies, and supports the production of transformed designs (publishable multimodal texts of their own making).

Like the challenges faced by the NLG in creating a single text combining the voices of many, we too faced the challenge of writing this chapter from our different positions and discursive repertoires. Whose terms, phrases, or stylistic registers should be used when there are different and competing voices and possibilities? This is not trivial when the group is made up of experienced academics, undergraduates, and high school students. There were countless hours of behind-the-scenes deliberation, moments of consensus, wordplay, and experimentation with language. This 2-year-long process of co-generation of knowledge and authorship embodies the spirit of productive diversity, taking us to newfound and transformed ideas about what research can become when we, in the words of the NLG, "recruit, rather than attempt to ignore and erase the different subjectivities—interests, intentions, commitments, and purposes students bring to learning" (New London Group, p. 72).

In what follows, we try to make visible our different subjectivities through foregrounding different "voices" as we describe the project and our findings. We identify the lead authors in the heading of each section (i.e., Youth Researchers, All Researchers). After the introductions, the youth researchers took charge of describing PIO, providing a step-by-step process of PIO, as well as its goals and purposes. The "we" in this

section, although inclusive, refers to the youth, who had free rein to describe PIO and narrate the story of our collective research. The text reflects their discourse style and word choice (e.g., describing the research group as "cool" or "beautiful"). In subsequent sections we summarize our research and findings.

Introducing the Intergenerational Research Group and *Poetry Inside Out*

First we offer a brief introduction of our research group members. The five youth researchers included Elvis Arancibia, Saint Cyr Dimanche, Deborah Diaz Lembert, and Kevin Sanchez. Deborah was born in the U.S.A and the other four are immigrants. All except for Saint Cyr speak Spanish as well as English; Saint Cyr is fluent in four languages and Kevin also speaks Quechua. Abby Moon was an undergraduate at Clark University, and before joining this research group, she co-facilitated an after-school program using the Poetry Inside Out framework. Jie Park, an assistant professor at Clark University, attended schools in South Korea and in the United States, which is how she developed a deep interest in linguistic and cultural navigations of immigrant youth. Sarah Michaels is a professor at Clark and was a member of the original NLG.

In addition to describing our research team, it is important to describe the context of our study. Claremont Academy is a public secondary school (grades 7–12) located in Worcester, MA, with approximately 500 students. About 89 percent come from low-income families, 80 percent of the students are students of color, and 41 percent are English language learners. While the Main South neighborhood, where Clark and Claremont are both located, is "poor," based on economic statistics, we see it as among the richest in the Commonwealth.

A Step-by-Step sketch of PIO (Youth Researchers)

In PIO, the teacher gives students a packet with the poem page and translator's glossary. In addition to the poem, the poem page includes a picture of the poet, and the poet's biography. The biography highlights the conditions of the poet's life and his or her perspectives. The translator's glossary provides a definition, information about the part of speech, and possible synonyms for every word in the poem.

First, students read the poet's biography, making connections with parts of the poem. Then several students take turns reading the poem in its original language. If it's written in a non-Roman script, there is a transliterated version. According to Elvis, in PIO anyone can read the poem, even when no one in the class speaks the language of the poem.

After reading the poem and biography, students in pairs work on a phrase-by-phrase translation of the poem into English. Next, two pairs come together and a group of four students work on the "make-it-flow," a translation that accounts for the poem's style, structure, and pattern (e.g., rhyme and repetition). When translating a poem written in a language that a student speaks at home, the "language expert" helps everyone in the group to understand the poem. Elvis noted that when translating Spanish poems, he helped his group to understand that a particular word in Spanish can mean many different things, not just what is listed in the translator's glossary. If there are other language experts in the group, they may have their own ideas about what words to use. These different ideas help everyone to understand not just the word, but also the poem, more deeply.

After the make-it-flow, each group presents its translation of the poem. Typically, one person reads the translation, but in some cases the group might perform the poem together. After listening, students discuss differences and similarities in the translations, ask each other why groups translated the same word or phrase differently, and what the poem might mean.

In the view of the youth researchers, the richest parts of PIO are students' working to make the poem flow, sharing translations in front of the class, and discussing the poem's possible meanings. When they work to make the poem flow, students bring out and share ideas they have inside. It is a mixing of ideas. When they work to understand the meaning of the poem, students notice specific words, connections to the biography, and repetition and patterns. When students share, they discuss why they chose a word and who chose it. The translations are similar, but there is always a difference, even just one word. It takes three or four class sessions to fully complete the process.

After translating different poems, students create their own poem pages, with biographies, self-portraits, and translator's glossaries if the poem is written in one of their home languages, all modeled after PIO poem pages. If their poem is written in a language other than English, they also provide an English translation. They present the poem in front of the class in both the language it is written in, and in English.

GOALS OF *POETRY INSIDE OUT* (YOUTH RESEARCHERS)

As a research group, we discussed the goals and purposes of PIO. For example, Deborah believes that students gain leadership skills, gain more confidence in themselves, and develop academic skills including translating, debating an opinion or view, and reflecting on learning. PIO helps students appreciate what others have to say. Elvis believes that the goal of PIO is to improve classroom cultures. According to Elvis, in PIO

students need help from their classmates to translate a poem. Everyone has to share their ideas, and talk with others. Some of us observed that before PIO students tended to talk with others who spoke the same language. In PIO, students worked with others who speak different languages and come from different countries. At the end of the year, students knew their entire class, could talk to anyone, and knew more about others' ways of thinking, culture, and background.

In PIO there is no right or wrong answer. However, students are expected to defend their translation, using evidence that includes the biography, their knowledge of language, and their personal experiences and worldviews. The teacher can see what the students are trying to understand in the poem and how they are working together. This helps the teacher see the cultural and linguistic strengths of their students, listen carefully to their ideas, and in some cases, change the way they teach and approach the students individually. PIO shifts the dynamic where students actively participate and teachers listen more.

Poetry Inside Out in a 12th-Grade English Class (Youth Researchers)

Our research took place in Lori Simpson's 12th grade English class. The class consisted of 22 students; all but two were English language learners. The languages spoken were English, Spanish, Vietnamese, French, Arabic, and patois. PIO was a consistent part of the course, taking place every 2 weeks. Over the year the class translated six to seven poems and created their own poem pages, presenting them at a final poetry reading. Spanish was the most common language used by students in the class. Ms. Simpson embraced PIO and youth research, creating a space for the research group to work. She was committed to full participation among her students and fostered an atmosphere where everyone's opinion mattered and students felt safe to speak their minds.

Whenever PIO took place, the youth researchers brought their audio recorders and notebooks to record small-group and whole-class discussions. Outside of class youth researchers conducted interviews with selected classmates using the interview protocol the group developed. In the next section we describe the intergenerational research team, focusing on the ways we learned to learn together, and listen to one another.

Youth Research Team and Research Process: The Beginning

Our research began in September of 2014 when Jie invited every student in Ms. Simpson's first-period class to join a research team. Six students

joined the group. We met once a week after school in Ms. Simpson's classroom.

Five of the six youth had participated in PIO during their junior year. In the first few meetings, we discussed PIO and our experiences with it. We talked about our identities—where we came from, what life was like there, and how the education there is different from here. Cultural and linguistic diversity was a beautiful and interesting part of our group, because our backgrounds and cultures influenced a great part of our work. Jie and Sarah handed out recorders and research notebooks and asked students to start audio-recording and writing down what was happening during PIO. We read articles by members of the NLG, including Jim Gee and Courtney Cazden, and other scholars.

We began each meeting with a focused free-write, where everyone wrote for 10 minutes in response to a prompt. This was designed to activate our knowledge and ideas about PIO and research. The expectation was that some of our writing would be shared publicly within our meetings. When we wanted to understand a concept more completely, the youth instituted the practice of examining a word in each of our home languages (for example, words like *context*).

Because the youth researchers are bilingual, and Claremont is a predominantly bilingual school, we wanted our research to focus on the experiences of bilingual youth. Over many sessions of discussion and writing, we developed the following research questions:

- How does PIO help bilingual high school students understand more about themselves and others?
- What do bilingual high school students gain from participating in PIO?

In addition to the adults' recordings of each class session, the youth researchers began to audio-record themselves and their classmates during PIO. When we met in the research group, we listened to some of the recordings and looked at transcripts. Each youth prepared to interview a classmate. We negotiated and reached consensus on a set of questions to ask these classmates.

The "How" and the "What" of *Poetry Inside Out* (All Researchers)

Our approach to data analysis was eclectic. We worked from transcripts of sessions that struck any of us as interesting, puzzling, or significant. Jie transcribed most of the classroom segments, but the youth, particularly Deborah, transcribed when multiple languages were in play. Sarah and Jie transcribed several episodes of the research group meetings, and

the youth transcribed their own interviews. These transcripts became our data corpus from which to search for patterns, themes, and evidence for claims. From multiple readings, annotations, and discussion of the data, we developed five themes: safe and open communication, confidence in our voices, discussion about meaningful yet taboo topics, deep focus on language, and special listening. Due to space limitations, here we focus on one theme, special listening.

Special Listening: "How" and "What"

This theme, special listening, is unusual. The other four themes focus on the use and production of language for communication. In contrast, listening is typically thought of as silence and something that goes on inside an individual's head. In contrast, we view listening as an active, collaborative accomplishment. This theme serves as a foundational "what" and "how" for PIO. It is, in our view, at the core of *how* PIO works to promote learning across differences, and it is also a critical capacity (a valued *what*) that is engendered in participants.

By special listening we mean a kind of listening that is different from what typically counts as listening in everyday lifeworlds, as well as in conversation analysis, sociolinguistics, and classroom discourse literatures (Schiffrin, Tannen & Hamilton, 2008; Schultz, 2003). It means more than just listening with one's ears—that is, taking in what someone else is saying. It means listening with ears, eyes, mind, one's history, culture, languages, and actively and interactively trying to see behind what the person is saying. Yet still it's more than that. The listener also must want to develop her own ideas further. It's an interested kind of listening. You want to hear and understand what the other person is saying because you want to learn from him, and build a better understanding of what he thinks, but also about what you think.

Special listening is a capacity that you develop over time. But it is not an individual (inside the head) process. Special listening requires interaction between two or more people (minds) and it requires that more than one person is both speaking and listening. Here are some dimensions that distinguish special listening from what we typically associate with listening:

- Special listening starts with having an idea, some kind of meaning that one wants to share (or grow).
- Special listening assumes that you are listening with interest, because you want to understand someone else's ideas to make your idea clearer or bigger.
- To practice special listening, you must have knowledge, a

position, or a perspective first. You can't do special listening without key elements of a context or framework in place.
- When you practice special listening, you get something more than just what the other person says. You learn about the other person, her background, or why she has this to say.

While looking through our transcripts, we realized that something unusual was going on in terms of the ways students were listening to each other and asking for clarification. We started to talk about this kind of listening, but we didn't know what to call it. One of the youth suggested we simply call it special listening. Some of us like the term; some of us are dissatisfied because "special" is so vague.

We identified episodes that stood out as particularly interesting, often ones where students worked in and across multiple languages successfully, or engaged in extended struggle and then made what seemed like breakthroughs. The one we focus on here took place in the spring of 2014, as the class translated a Polish poem by Wislawa Szymborska. This particular segment (3 minutes of a 35-minute recording) took place during the first day of the make-it-flow translation, the third day that the students had been working on this poem. Deborah and Elvis were in a group with three other classmates, Bobby, Rudy, and Marbella. The group was working on a shared translation of the first line and stanza of the poem. This is what they eventually agreed on: "When I say the word future, the first syllable already belongs to the past."

To illustrate the process of special listening, next we provide a detailed description of a segment of this group's conversation. At the beginning of the segment, each student has a "Phrase-by-Phrase" translation as well as a "Make-it-Flow" page. Deborah looks at the papers on the table, then refers to her paper, which has the words "starts the syllable, belongs to the past." She asks the group (in Spanish) if they should go with this or change it, finishing her turn by shifting to English, and asking if there's anything they want to "add in or challenge." There's silence, with Bobby looking at the two pages in front of him, moving his lips, reading silently. He utters something under his breath and begins to write on the "Make-it-Flow" page. Elvis and Rudy look at their own papers and at the others. Deborah initiates a focus on the word "belongs," and Bobby says, "Belongs already to the past." Deborah says "already," and asks the others in Spanish what they think. As the others talk, Bobby very softly reads, "When I say the word future, start syllable belongs already to the past." He then nods his head and loudly says, "Mmmmm," as if he finally got it. The entire group orients to Bobby. Deborah says, "What does that mean, 'already'?" and, speaking over Elvis, says "I want to, like, understand what he means." This begins a long segment of Bobby trying to explain to Deborah what he

means, trying to give an example ("So for example, when you're reading this—pointing to the paper and reading—"When I say the word future, the start syllable is already in the past." He continues, "Now if you look in the past, what word is in the past? He pauses and looks Deborah in the eye, with a questioning expression, and says, "Past." Deborah says she doesn't think she's getting it. Bobby then shifts modalities. He says, "Look it, look it, look, look, look," and grabs two pencils, a yellow highlighter, and a pink cell phone from the table.

He lines them up in a row, and says the words, "When I—say—the word—future," pointing to each object in turn on the beat. And then he follows with the words, "it already belongs to the past," moving his hand out past the objects, as if down the road in time.

Now that he's established the movement of words in time, a timeline of sorts, he moves his hand dramatically back, returning to the pink cell phone (which was standing in for the word "future,") and points to it. He says, "And back here (in time) is what?" using the intonation of a teacher testing. Deborah says, "The past?" Bobby confirms, saying, "The past." He then reviews, continuing to motion forward and back in time: "So when I say this word" (hands cupped over the cell phone), "It already belongs to the past once I've said it."

Deborah and the entire group, quite joyously, demonstrate that they get it, in both Spanish and in English. Deborah has engaged in special listening, which in turn helped Bobby explicate a complicated and counterintuitive idea, unpacking his understanding through word, gesture, and a staged performance with objects, to a multilingual audience.

The youth researchers, not the university professors, first identified and worked hard over months to explicate the notion of special listening. It's perhaps because the youth were new to academic work on classroom discourse, and were not steeped in traditional analytic categories separating speakers and listeners or steeped in the emphasis of "within the head" thinking that is dominant in much academic writing on reasoning. We have come to see for ourselves the value of youth perspectives on what counts as data, what counts as knowledge, and where our standard categories for classroom discourse and educational curricula need to expand.

Theorizing Multiliteracies from Youth Research (Jie and Sarah)

We end by asking two questions: (1) What is the significance of the NLG's ideas for our work with PIO and the inclusion of youth researchers? and (2) What is the significance of our work for the vision and ideas—the "what" and "how" of a pedagogy of multiliteracies and productive diversity—put forward by the NLG, 20 years later?

We see the NLG manifesto's greatest contribution in providing a metalanguage and framework for talking with practitioners, colleagues, and students about PIO and other educational programs and practices. Here we mean both the constructs and terms relating to design (available designs, designing, and redesign) as well as the framework around pedagogy (situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice). With the multiliteracies metalanguage, we now see PIO as a design space where students-as-translators use their available designs of meaning, along with the poem itself and the translator's glossary, "in the process of shaping emergent meaning [that] involves representation and recontextualization" (New London Group, 1996, p. 75). We also see youth research, with opportunities for youth to engage in a sustained practice around research. We see youth receive, at times, overt instruction from more knowledgeable adults about research tools and analytic approaches. We see them critically frame their educational experiences and learning. We see them generate new knowledge, as a form of multiliteracies pedagogy. Multiliteracies practice in the youth research group inspired, and then cultivated, youths' interest in, and imagination around, special listening.

The value of these constructs grows out of and persists as a result of the productive diversity the group brought together.

> The role of pedagogy is to develop an epistemology of pluralism that provides access without people having to erase or leave behind different subjectivities. This has to be the basis of a new norm. (New London Group, 1996, p. 72)

While it is far more common today to hear about "recruiting" or "leveraging" diversity as assets (Lee, 1993; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2006; Park, Simpson, Bicknell, & Michaels, 2015), we find ourselves writing this conclusion (in the summer of 2016) when these views are still questioned, publicly denounced, and rejected by leaders and private citizens in tweets and blogs across the media-sphere. The youth voices and the work we did together stand as a strong counter-voice to these leaders and private citizens, lending support to the manifesto's argument that productive diversity is possible, generative, and a viable means to writing new social futures.

It is our hope that youth-centered multiliteracies research will continue not only to impact the youth involved (and us), but also to add dimensions to the construct as it was conceived 20 years ago. The perspectives brought forward by the youth and the themes they constructed from their research add texture and color to a set of theoretical terms and programmatic principles. Therefore, in closing, we want to make the case for the value and power of youth-led practitioner inquiry. As designers of meaning and knowledge, youth-as-practitioner inquirers

remake themselves and expand their social futures, and in the process, help adult researchers who work with them or who read their work do the same.

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