"Postcards from America": Linking Classroom and Community in an ESL Class

EILEEN LANDAY WITH MARY BETH MEEHAN, A. LEONARD NEWMAN, KURT WOOTTON, AND DONALD W. KING

Ariel Montero stands in the doorway of a downstairs meeting room of Progreso Latino, an education and community service organization in Central Falls, Rhode Island. The meeting room has been temporarily converted into an art gallery, and an opening reception, complete with *hors d'oeuvres* and punch, is in progress. About a hundred people fill the room. Ariel, fifteen years old and one of the featured artists, studies the scene. Recently emigrated from the Dominican Republic to Central Falls, Rhode Island, he is a student in Leonard Newman and Richard Kinslow's Accelerated Literacy Class at Central Falls Senior High School.

Today, he and thirty classmates—all recently arrived in the US with little or no prior English—are hosting a display of their photographs and writing at Progreso Latino. Ariel's photo, titled "Jenks Park Tower," is a striking composition of a local landmark as seen through the bars of a jungle gym on which two of his friends are playing. Mounted on the wall next to the photo is a companion poem by classmate Bruno Alves, which conveys in print the same images that appear in Ariel's photo.

Jenks Park Tower

Symbol of my city
Central Falls
I see the clock
I hear the children playing
I feel happy when I'm in the park.

I play soccer
I play football and
I swing on the swings with
my friends.

A good place for children to play,
a good place to have fun, and
a good place to chill with my friends.

Jenks Park is in Central Falls.

—Bruno Alves

Other photos in the exhibit and the accompanying poems, letters, and stories highlight other aspects of these student's lives in this small Rhode Island city. They depict places and people: landmarks and local businesses; friends, alone and in groups; families, indoor and out. Children are the subject of much of the work—younger siblings of the artists or members of their extended families. At the opening reception, with their work mounted and hung around the room, the youthful artists watch as visitors circulate, commenting on their photos and writing. Some are shy, hanging back, observant; others engage with guests, discussing the work and the project.

Two weeks later, these same students stand on the stage in the high school auditorium, again presenting their original work to the public, this time in a multimedia performance they named "Postcards from America." In the nine performance pieces that make up "Postcards," students' photographs—projected in giant size onto screens on the stage—are combined with music, dance, and theatrical performance of their writing portraying personal stories of the immigrant experience.

"Jenks Park Tower" Photo by Ariel Montero

These two events were the culminating activities of a semester-long project that students worked on in Newman and Kinslow's class during the spring of 2000. Working with their teachers and a professional photographer, students produced a visual record of their friends, families, homes, and neighborhood. They then translated those visual images into print texts. The photos were mounted alongside student writing and exhibited, first at the school, and later at Progreso Latino. Several students' photos appeared in the area's major newspaper, the *Providence Journal-Bulletin.* Finally, with the assistance of a performing artist, students created nine performance pieces inspired by the photography and writing. The culminating activity, the multimedia production of "Postcards from America," was performed on June 2, 2000, at Central Falls High School.

The project drew on the resources of three different but overlapping communities: 1) the internal community of classroom and school; 2) the community of the students' homes and neighborhoods; and 3) the extended community of business, the arts, higher education, and social services.

The overall design of "Postcards"—engaging students in learning English language skills through workshops on photography, creative writing, and drama—was created by Newman and Kinslow in collaboration with Kurt Wootton, Director of the Arts/Literacy Project (A/LP) at Brown University.[1] A/LP is a curriculum development and professional development project that works with secondary school teachers during summers and the academic year to explore the potential of performance work for developing literacy skills among adolescents. Founded three years ago at Brown University, A/LP carries out this work by pairing teachers and arts professionals. This partnership begins with an extensive summer professional development program and continues in teachers' classrooms during the academic year. Teachers and artists plan and teach together in collaboration with an experienced mentor, who observes and debriefs their work. Brown University students interested in teaching with and through the arts participate as classroom assistants and documentors.

While its initial work has been in theatre arts, the Arts/Literacy Project is neither a traditional drama program that focuses on replicating a product for audience consumption nor process drama work, which focuses on role play as a method for

developing and deepening participants' understanding of content and skill in perspective-taking. (For an overview of the process drama approach, developed in the UK by Dorothy Heathcote, see Wagner, 1998.) Combining elements of both approaches, A/LP's major focus is to construct a classroom community in which adolescents develop the skills and habits of mind to convey meaning through—and recover meaning from—a range of symbol systems, most explicitly, print text.

A participant in A/LP since its inception three years ago, Newman has regularly taken part in summer and academic year programs, working closely with other teachers, professional actors, and mentors. In previous work with A/LP, Newman had developed a writing-to-performance program he called "Stories Keep Our Cultures Alive." Now, with Wootton's assistance, they expanded the program to include Mary Beth Meehan, a staff photographer with *The Providence Journal Bulletin*, and Donald King, the artistic director of the Providence Black Repertory Company. With the newly-added photography component, Newman and Kinslow's students were able to use several media to make their work visible to the community and to describe in words, images, and performances the rich and complex experience of being a newcomer in the United States. In the sections that follow, each of the teaching participants describes his/her contribution to and perspective on the project. The final section reviews the ways in which internal and external communities intersected in support of the project.

Beginning with Photography

Mary Beth Meehan

Since 1995, my work at *The Providence Journal* has been to round out the picture of the urban immigrant experience in Rhode Island, to go beyond the quick-hit news story to communicate the complex experience of life as a newcomer to America. Interested to learn what would happen if adolescent newcomers were given the opportunity to present their world through visual images, I began to work with students in Central Falls's Accelerated Literacy classroom. The Nikon Camera Company donated thirty point-and-shoot cameras for the students to use. *The Providence Journal* provided film, processing, computer access and equipment, and printing. *The Journal* also gave me the use of a laptop computer and video projector to conduct the class.

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Twice weekly, from January 3 to March 28, 2000, I met with the students in Len Newman and Richard Kinslow's Accelerated Literacy class. The assignment was to create photographs of their friends, families, and communities. As predicted, students initially saw the camera as an instrument with which to record static situations, posed snapshots of each other—"statue" pictures. To introduce them to the concept of the candid photo, we showed them work by photographers in the documentary tradition. By discussing these photographs, students came to see what could be captured with a camera and learned a vocabulary of photography. (See Figure 1.) Along with the technical vocabulary, the students used their general English vocabulary to talk about themselves, their families, and their friends. They had to articulate what mattered to them—what they loved, what they hated—and they had to learn to explicate a photograph: to describe who or what was pictured, and how the person or the situation made them feel.

Our goals were to

- help students understand the importance of photographing their lives and see that stories of their daily experiences would be of interest to others
- identify what those stories were
- find a way to tell those stories photographically

After the students photographed, I chose and presented a weekly selection of their work, and we developed a rubric for looking at photographs. (See Figure 2.)

FIGURE 1.
PHOTOGRAPHY CHECKLIST

- Is the photograph *clear*?
- Is the subject *well framed*?
- Is the subject in *focus*?
- Is the subject of the photograph *free of distractions*?
- Does the photograph *tell a story*?
- Does the photograph *bring out feelings*?

FIGURE 2.
READING PHOTOGRAPHS

1. What were you looking at when you took the photograph?
2. What did you see in the viewfinder?
3. Who is in your photograph?
4. Where are they?
5. Describe the location/room, etc. where the photograph was taken.
6. What are the people in the photograph doing?
7. What do you think they were doing before the photograph was taken?
8. Look at your photograph carefully. Tell the story that you see in the photograph.

The necessity of linking the verbal to the visual brought home to us how much these two skill areas complement one another. Students with only rudimentary English were justifiably proud of their photographs, which displayed a sense of composition, framing, moment, and lyricism. The works of Ariel Montero and Crisolita Teixeira were two stunning examples; they made inspired and beautiful photographs. (Ariel's photographs rival those of many professionals.) Other students just beginning to learn English produced similarly successful work.

These students showed us that, while some people work from the verbal toward the visual (learning about photography and then attempting it), students learning a new language can often benefit by exploring the visual and then creating language around it (making a photograph and then describing it). Either way, language skills develop.

Moving to Stories

Len Newman

For ten weeks, beginning in January, we looked at, talked about, and took photographs. Students took photographs in school, at home, and in the community. Each week, they talked about their own pictures and those of their classmates. In addition, each week students wrote, completing assignments and writing prompts that were either directly connected to their photographs or to the themes that we were exploring: family, friends, community, and school. The assignment shown in Figure 2, for example, focuses on the act of making the picture and its contents. The format of the assignment in Figure 3 asks students to describe details of the lives of the people shown in the photograph, while the assignment in Figure 4 provides a format for writing a short poem based on the photograph's contents.

The excitement generated by the work motivated us all to do whatever possible so that students could tell their stories with pictures. Lynda Gremza, the teacher assistant in our class, printed selected photographs, using her own computer and scanner at home at night and on weekends. College student volunteers from Brown University came to class regularly to work with the students on their spoken and written English. Over the course of the semester, all of us saw the personal growth, increased motivation, and sense of community that resulted

FIGURE 3.
STORIES KEEP OUR CULTURES ALIVE

1. Who is in the picture?
   "This is a picture of _____."
2. Where are they from?
3. What was their life like when they were in their country?
   a. What kind of work did they do?
   b. Did they go to school?
   c. Was their life easy or difficult? (Explain why.)
4. When did they come to the United States?
5. Why did they come to the United States? What do they do now?
6. What is their life like now? (Include information from your photograph that will help us know what they do and what their lives are like here in the US.)

FIGURE 4.
TITLES/NAMES

- Give your photograph a title. (Examples: The Person's Name—i.e., "Luis," My Friends, My Family, Love, My Home, Sisters, Snow, Rain, My Street, Tears, My School, Learning, My Teacher, Work, Dancing, Prayer, Community, Sleeping, Playing, etc.)
- *Who* is in the picture?
- *Three words* that describe their *feelings, what they are doing,* their *relationship* to you, etc.
- *Where* are they?
- *Who* is in the picture?

Examples:

Razor Cuts
Luis, Carlos and Me
Friends, Hanging Out, Together
In Our Community
Luis, Carlos, and Me

Friends
Xemina and Byron
Smiling, Content, and Shy
In Our Classroom
Byron and Xemina

Sisters
Carla and Lynda
Fighting, Laughing, Loving Each Other
In Our Living Room
Carla and Lynda

from giving these students the opportunity to do good work and present it to one another and members of the wider community.

An informal assessment of the project showed that students' oral and written language did indeed improve as a result of their participation in the project. So, too, did their facility and comfort with cameras. They learned to tell stories with and about pictures. Sometimes the stories were poignant and touching. Sometimes they were playful. Whatever qualities the photographs displayed, they were always authentic and important to the students who were telling them. Students learned, gained a great deal of confidence through their work, and were justly proud when their work was mounted first in the school's conference room and later in a public exhibition at Progreso Latino.

Developing the Performance

Kurt Wootton

By mid-March, we had a collection of student photographs, poems, and stories. We then organized the first exhibition of student work. Students stood in front of their photos in the school conference room and read their poem, letter, or story to a small group of parents, teachers, administrators, and college students. The challenge now became to take the stories and photographs they generated and develop a theatrical production to present to a larger community. Most of the students had never been on a stage before. Many were timid when participating in class discussions; some didn't participate at all. How were we to create an atmosphere where they all could feel safe and confident enough to perform on a stage in front of a large audience? Donald King, artistic director of the Providence Black Repertory Company, joined us as a collaborating artist to help move the students to performance. For the next ten weeks, he visited twice a week to help students conceptualize, rehearse, and polish their performance. A former high school football player, Donald, began by saying to the students matter-of-factly, "Everyone on the stage for the warm-up. It's just like playing sports; you need to get your body ready to perform. Reach up to the ceiling and STRETCH."

One by one students mounted the steps to the stage and formed themselves into a circle. Don took them through a series of stretches and movement exercises. Always smiling, always insistent, he introduced them to exercises such as the fast-paced "Shake down, count down." In unison they "shook out" each of their limbs in turn while counting down, beginning with ten. First ten quick shakes of one arm, then the other arm, then each leg. Then nine shakes, then eight, repeating the pattern until finally, energized and laughing, they finished by giving one quick shake of each arm and each leg.

The warm-ups moved from physical to vocal. "I can't hear you. Repeat after me," Don called out. Several rounds of 'RED LEATHER, YELLOW LEATHER' were followed by several more rounds of 'YOU KNOW YOU NEED UNIQUE NEW YORK.'" The students, many of whom were timorous about their spoken English, began to pronounce the tongue twisters more clearly and to participate more wholeheartedly and confidently. During the warm-ups, Don made eye

contact and spoke to every student in the class. Every day the students began the class by gathering in a circle on the stage to do warm-ups. They looked at each other and laughed together. The classroom community strengthened.

After warm-ups, students in groups of four to six chose key words from a story one of the group members had written—stories of friendship, school, community, music, family—and created tableaux, or "frozen sculptures." Designing tableaux around single words helped the students to focus on the central themes of the story and made language accessible for performance. When students felt successful with one key word, they would then move to sentences and eventually to dialogue. Each group competed with the others to create the most imaginative tableaux. Students assessed their tableaux with a simple performance rubric. (See Figure 5.)

After a group practiced forming tableaux based on each group member's story, they then selected one story to interpret, again through a series of tableaux. Slowly, they added words and movement to connect the tableaux. Eventually, the class had five stories involving dialogue, movement, music, and dance. To round out the performance, they added two choral chants, "Children of the World" and "Immigrant Chant," performed by the entire class, and a Latino Rap, a hip hop scene involving rap and dance.

The set for the performance consisted of two projection screens cut to represent silhouettes of North and South America. A series of student photographs was projected onto the silhouette: Crisolita's mother and father holding hands in a flower shop, Edwin's brother looking into the engine of a friend's car. The students performed their stories with their photographs as background. The images symbolized a journey from another country to America and the mixing of cultures in this town of one square mile, Central Falls. The performance process was also a journey for artists, teachers, and students. None of us knew when we began where we would be at the end. We came to see, though, that two essential features of the journey were to create a community in the classroom and to link it closely to the students' home communities outside the classroom.

FIGURE 5.
CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD PERFORMANCE RUBRIC

- Cooperates
- Shows Commitment
- Is Focused
- Speaks Clearly
- Speaks Loudly
- Shows Appropriate Facial Expression
- Is Energetic
- Is Confident

Students stood in front of their photos in the school conference room and read their poem, letter, or story to a small group of parents, teachers, administrators, and college students.

The importance of maintaining this link became obvious one day when the students weren't focused in the warm-up; they played with the curtains, talked to each other, participated half-heartedly. Don calmly asked the students to step off the stage and have a seat in the auditorium chairs. "Mother's Day is coming soon. I want you to think of this performance as a gift for your mothers, as a gift to your community. All of us have to work together to create something larger than ourselves. We all need to play a part in that creation." Don found the heart of the work. Performance is a way to keep the students' stories alive. It served as a medium for students to communicate with their community. Moreover, in preparing the performance, the students had to join together as a classroom community for the art form to be fully realized.

Creating in the Community/ for the Community

Eileen Landay

Beginning with the community built inside the Accelerated Literacy classroom, the "Postcards from

America"project radiated out from a strong center. One of Len Newman's favorite admonitions to students is that they "take care of one another." The activities that produced "Postcards" offered many opportunities—and in fact, the necessity—to demonstrate that care. By looking at their classmates' photographs, students looked directly into one another's lives. By listening to them talk about those photographs and reading their writing, students came to know more about how others in their class thought and felt about their worlds. Powerfully aware of their tentative grasp of English and fearing they might be ridiculed, many students were initially reticent about speaking English. Second language theorists Krashen and Terrell speak about a "silent period" when people first encounter situations where they must use a new language.

The "Postcards"project was designed to provide students with a focus and purpose for developing language; to create a challenge worth rising to; and to promote *self-regulation*, the ability to monitor their own learning processes and select useful strategies to complete a task, as Baum and others describe, all while building a strong community in which students supported one another in moving from "silence" in English to "voice":

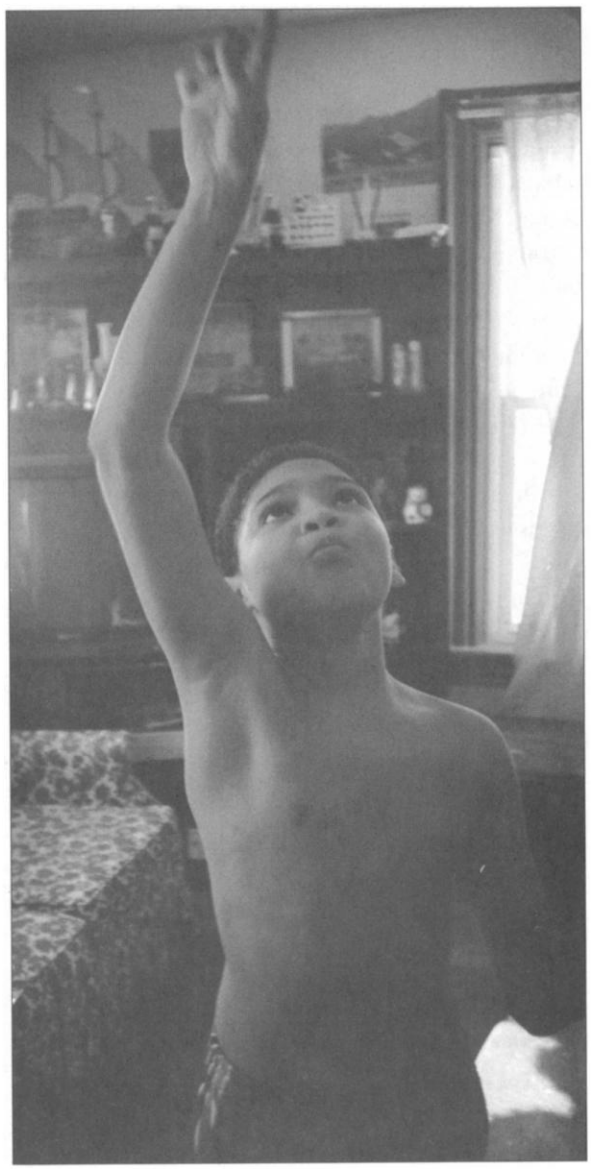
> . . . [I]n the process of acting in and on their environment people's voices are fashioned. But while voice is tied to subjectivity and identity . . . [it] is not an expression of individual consciousness but a reflection of and a coming to terms with the multiple and complex social relations and realities that inform consciousness and position the individual. (Walsh 33)

Explicit links were built between the classroom and the wider community. In their photography, writing, and performance work, students were encouraged to cross the boundaries between their classroom and family, classroom and town, and new and old world. One vivid example is Donald King's directive that students consider the "Postcards" performance a Mother's Day gift. Other examples exist in the artifacts students created. Henry Zepeda sent this letter to his *abuela* in Central America with an accompanying photograph:

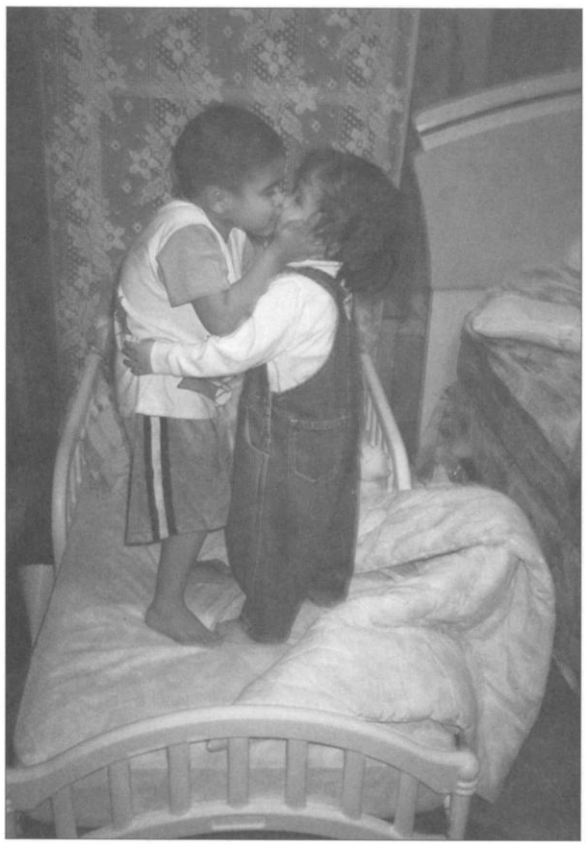
> Dear Abuela,
>
> How are you? I am fine. I miss you very much and wish that you could be here with me. I am sending you a photograph from America. I took it in our house in Central Falls. It is a picture of Vitorio playing basketball in our bedroom. He is always happy and he is feeling very excited. When I look at this picture, I feel very proud because he is my little brother and he is having fun. The thing that I like most about this picture is that I took it just as Vitorio was going to shoot the ball. I hope that you like the picture too.
>
> Sincerely,
> Henry

Evelyn Guiterrez wrote the following poem and took a photograph of her cousins Ronnie and Carolina.

The Kiss
Ronnie and Carolina
Kissing and loving, cousins
In the bedroom
Ronnie and Carolina



"Vitorio Playing Basketball" Photo by Henry Zepeda



"The Kiss" Photo by Evelyn Gutierrez

These artifacts link several "communities of practice" as noted by Vygotsky, and Lee and Smagorinsky, each of which shares a set of social practices and goals. By helping to create "Postcards from America," students gain "tools" that have meaning across communities, both in and out of school.

Finally, the rich network of connections between the work of this classroom and other organizations is evident in the many acknowledgements that appear in the program handed out at the "Postcards" performance. Benefits accrue in both directions: between the classroom and the local newspaper, repertory theatre company, university, and social service agency.

This year's "Postcards from America" project at Central Falls represented a first step in incorporating photography into performance and literacy work. As both Len Newman and Mary Beth Meehan predicted, photography is a powerful tool for building community and developing literacy in the setting they created. Len Newman is fond of pointing out to his students that stories keep our cultures alive, and that the ability to tell stories leads to the ability to link different aspects of one's identity. Len explains that many immigrants have felt pressure to abandon the old in adopting the new. Through the communities that he and others have created within and outside classrooms, students have improved their verbal and visual language and learned that in their new country their stories are important.

"Postcards from America," with its network of nested communities, gave thirty students an opportunity to document and communicate to others the rich and complex experience of being a young newcomer to the US. The project demonstrates the power of what students can accomplish when supported by multiple overlapping communities that have an interest in their development. Many teachers know this. They also know how time-consuming and difficult it is to bring these communities together to work productively. Organization is necessary and takes time that many teachers do not have. Some are fortunate enough to be able to draw on support from sources such as the Arts/Literacy Project. Others heroically manage on their own.

While the scope of the "Postcards from America" project may seem greater than many classroom teachers feel able to undertake, the ideas behind it are applicable to any classroom: place students' lived experience at the center of the classroom community, link them to resources and communities outside the schoolhouse walls, use class time to develop a product for public presentation that both serves and connects the communities students live in now and those they hope to join.

Note

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EJ 20 YEARS AGO

Making Education "Tangible"

"The product of the school is unlike that of any other governmental agency. The public can see its tax monies paving and plowing streets, painting benches in the park, delivering mail, fighting fires, buying books for the public library, and patrolling streets. But the public cannot see education; it is intangible. Taxpayers have themselves been in school, but they are suspicious of it. . . .Furthermore, many schools are places, owned by the public, where the public is often not welcome except for athletic, musical, and dramatic events. Classrooms are off limits to all except those students and teachers assigned to them. Such an atmosphere creates the impression that something is going on in the school, especially in its classrooms, that is at best mysterious and at worst subversive."

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