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## Attending to Hu'huk: Lessons For a Teacher

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## ATTENDING TO *HU'HUK*: LESSONS FOR A TEACHER elizabeth park

***Feign* was the word; it began a journey that took me from a New Jersey middle school classroom to the Sonoran Desert and back again.** On the way, I learned valuable lessons about the ways in which social class and political power can play out over a succession of centuries. I learned to look into the past for guidance, not only to the history of nations, but also to the history of my own family. These lessons all led me to a deeper understanding of the potential power embedded in a pedagogy that seeks to build on student strengths.

It started with an eighth-grade literature class and a vocabulary lesson. It was my second year of teaching, and I was leaning heavily on the literature anthology that is standard issue in our public school classrooms. Each short story, play, or non-fiction article is accompanied by a series of exercises, and a list of words the publishers have determined to be unfamiliar to U.S. eighth graders. Teachers across the country faithfully teach these vocabulary words and their definitions.

I'd developed a process for approaching these semantic laundry lists, and it included more than definitions and the obligatory "use-the-word-in-a-sentence" instructions. Because 75% of the students in my school speak Spanish at home, I also included a translation exercise, offering the Spanish synonyms for the words in question. I'd also begun talking to students about the family history of English, and how it has relatives not only in the Germanic language family, but also in the Romance family. My goal, of course, was to bring English closer to many of my students. I fervently hoped this kind of knowledge would scaffold learning, helping my students build bridges between their two languages, in order to use each as a lever to reach greater academic achievement.

*Feign* was one of those vocabulary words. I don't remember the story that contained it, but ever since, I have felt the impact of this one word and what it taught me about my students and about my own misconceptions.

I puzzled over how to teach *feign*. It's a pretty highfalutin' kind of word, and I was distracted from the real task by the trappings with which we've invested

*feign*. As I pondered how to make the word real for my students, an unbidden fantasy played out in my mind. In this daydream, one of my eighth-grade boys had gone to the principal to make a confession. “Yo, Mr. B,” he said, imitating the discourse rhythms of one of the more popular hip hop singers, “I really was the one that wrote on the wall in the boys’ room, but when you asked me the first time, I feigned innocence.” I shook my head rapidly to rid myself of *that* image.

Ultimately, I decided to continue the format I’d been using, and when I looked up *feign* in my English-Spanish dictionary, I found *fingir*. The words were remarkably similar, even down to the “g,” no longer silent, but aspirated like a whisper. I tried it on the class, and every student knew *fingir*, and knowing *fingir* made it easier for them to add *feign* to their vocabularies. The connection drawn by that simple translation exercise made *feign* theirs to keep and to use.

I unpacked that experience for weeks, castigating myself for my assumptions. Whether they are official ESL students or not, my students speak Spanish. Spanish is very closely related to French, and *feign* came into English from French. After all, I knew that English was the daughter of an Anglo-Saxon father and a French mother. I knew that French was the sister of Spanish. And I knew that the French of the Norman conquerors was the language of the aristocracy, and that the Latinate vocabulary it has bequeathed to modern English retains an aura of privilege and sophistication. Why on earth would I assume that an English word that was the obvious legacy of a Norman overlord would be inaccessible to young people who spoke a language as closely connected to the aristocratic French tongue as is Spanish?

This led me to stop assuming that I, or a textbook mega-publisher, could presume to know my students’ vocabulary needs. I now teach English as a Second Language, and I still don’t assume. For several years, I’ve conducted a sustained silent reading program for my eighth-grade English Language Learners. A component of the program is vocabulary. I don’t, however, try to take control any longer. I let the students tell me what they don’t understand. Then we talk about it. I’ve learned that they have many strengths to call on in decoding English vocabulary, and that one of them is the powerful prior knowledge they have of words with Latin roots. And I found that I learned more, and was a better

teacher, when I let my students show me where their strengths were, and let them ask for help when they needed it.

It's not always easy, however, for students who are accustomed to traditional pedagogical methods to accept a teacher whose methods are "different." Esteban was in both my ESL reading class and my ESL writing class, and he challenged me repeatedly at the beginning of the year.

"Why don't you ask us to write book reports?"

"Why don't you give us tests on the books?"

"Why aren't we all reading the same book?"

"Why aren't we reading out loud?"

There was anger behind his questions, but there was something much deeper, far beneath the anger. Esteban was a young man who took his studies extremely seriously. His grades were very good. He and his two brothers had come to the U.S. with their mother, a widow, only the year before. As I got to know him better, I learned that he and his brothers were determined to do as well as they could in school so that they could get high-paying jobs and relieve their mother of the burdens she had shouldered in order to raise them. His anger, it seemed, came from a suspicion that silent reading wasn't really serious study, and therefore wouldn't help him reach that goal.

I always answered his questions as honestly as I could. One day I told him that I'd read that the "average" U.S. student adds 3,000 new words a year to his vocabulary (Gleason, p. 409), and that by age seventeen, an English-speaking student in this country could have a vocabulary as large as 80,000 words (Wong-Fillmore and Snow, p. 18). The best way I knew for him to learn as many new words as he could was to read, and read, and read some more. With silent reading, he could progress at his own pace (which was astonishingly rapid) and he could take part in the class discussions about words, phrases, and their meaning. He thought about it for a minute, and then nodded. I didn't say this, but perhaps should have: that with this kind of self-paced learning, he could build on his strengths in ways that were best for him. Soon he was advocating sustained silent

reading more powerfully to his peers than ever I could. He's now a high school junior, and I saw him the other day. He told me he is still reading as much as he can, and he's still on track to meet his goal. His mother must be very proud of him. I certainly am.

Having come to the realization that I could learn far more about teaching—and learning—if I stopped trying to force-fit classroom interactions into the shape I thought they should assume, and if I stopped talking long enough to listen, I began to use this lens as a way to look at far more than vocabulary.

I kept track of the words my students asked about. I wanted to learn as much as I could from what they had to say. It was fascinating, and I pored over the lists, looking for what the aggregate of their vocabulary questions could tell me. They told me something that was at once startling and also so obvious that I wondered why I hadn't realized it earlier.

The words my students needed to know about were almost never the multi-syllabic words that many of us, as teachers, think they don't understand. Their questions were about the shorter words that we teachers assume will be part of the vocabulary a student brings with her to school. After all, don't children take *naps*, and don't they learn to *nod* their heads to signify agreement, and *shake* them to disagree, and don't we caution them not to *slip* or *slide* on the *ice*? Aren't those the easy words?

They are, however, far from easy for my Spanish-speaking English Language Learners. My students will stumble over the word *sleepwalker* while they take *somnambulist* in their stride. They understand *injure*, but *hurt* is out of their reach. *Aspire* is easy for them, but *hope* is not. *Somnambulo*, *injuriar*, and *aspirar* are the Spanish cognates for *somnambulist*, *injure*, and *aspire*. In short, the English vocabulary that we've inherited from French and Latin is easily accessible to them, and the nursery and kindergarten words that are the simple vocabulary of the Saxon peasants, are not.

Coming to this conclusion was a trip that required acknowledging the dual vocabulary of English. It's almost a genetic model, with one meaning expressed by both a short word donated from the Anglo-Saxon father and a longer, more flowing word that's the gift of the French mother. Having thought this through, and

having begun to comprehend the implications for teaching English vocabulary to Spanish-speaking students, I felt I needed help. I wanted to validate my thinking about what was “easy” vocabulary for my students and what was not. At a conference of the Arizona Reading Association, I spoke with a number of educators, all of whom had an interest in English language learning, and many of whom spoke Spanish as their first language. Those whose linguistic heritage was Spanish all expressed a deep resonance when I described my observations. What I had observed was what they had lived.

The field of English language learning is as old as English and as new as the child who followed her parents this morning as they made their way through U.S. Immigration at Kennedy Airport. There are myriad angles of vision to use in developing an ELL classroom practice, and as I became familiar with the work of a range of theorists, I found I longed to listen to the voices of those who have been ELLs. I sought the same kind of authenticity that I’d found with those vocabulary discussions. I felt that I should weave the voices of those who are learning English with the voices of those who have already learned the language.

While visiting my daughter when she was a student at the University of Arizona, I met a group of educators who had learned English as a second language; they had been students in Indian Boarding Schools. Members of the Tohono O’odham Nation, they are teachers in the public school system that serves their nation’s reservation. Conversations with them led me to plan an ethnographic inquiry into what I consider a profound resource for better understanding how a second language is learned. The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation generously provided funding for the fieldwork, and the Education Committee of the Tohono O’odham Nation graciously granted access to the community’s intellectual property. Lillian Fayuant, kindergarten teacher at Indian Oasis Primary School in Sells, AZ, the reservation capital, offered time and help and gave both freely, even when it seemed that our project threatened to consume almost all of her summer vacation. She was guide and mentor, opening her encyclopedic knowledge of her community and its language to me.

The Indian Boarding School experiment has been studied for a number of purposes, including better understandings of social injustice and inequity of

access. These pedagogical prisons operated in force from the 1870's well into the middle of the twentieth century. They were intended to be a final assault in the Indian Wars the U.S. Government had waged against indigenous people in its quest for land and power. The architect of this school system was Colonel Henry Pratt, who expressed his vision by saying “. . . all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man” (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4929/>). Pratt, and his successors, sought to fulfill this purpose by wrenching Indian children away from their parents, transporting the children as far from home as possible, and forbidding the use of their tribal languages. Punishments were severe, and hard labor was exacted in exchange for the gift of a “civilized” education. Rations were meager, and often comprised food the children had never seen or tasted before. Many children died from malnutrition and from disease, as the cemetery at Carlisle Indian School in Carlisle, PA, attests.

As I prepared myself for conversations with tribal elders, I read as much material as I could find about Indian Boarding Schools. If ever there was a lesson in how not to teach a second language, I found it in the accounts I uncovered. The conversations Lillian and I had with elders from her community often focused on how, as children, they had learned English in boarding schools. Those conversations about ESL pedagogy became the foundation for my master's thesis. But because the elders, by virtue of their professions or their revered positions within their community, are educators the conversations also turned on philosophies of teaching. They often explored the nature of learning, and the role played by the relationship between teacher and learner.

Verna Enos is the tribal language and culture teacher at the reservation's primary school. In the context of our discussion, she spoke about the factors that can engage and excite a child about learning, and the factors that can prevent that eagerness from blossoming. She expressed the opinion that “until you honor who we are” (Park, p. 15), the latter will occur far more frequently than the former. As I reflected on this, I came to feel that her wisdom is applicable to any child who is schooled in ways and methods that are foreign to her home culture. Verna Enos led me to the question: “How can I best honor my students?”

Sometimes it's difficult to unwrap layers of defensiveness and the multiple strata of adolescent behavior to find that nugget of gold to honor.

Enrique challenged me daily with shrugs, rolled eyes, and muttered comments I couldn't understand and probably didn't want to. He avoided work, skipped class, and paraded any sort of disciplinary measure as a badge of honor. I came close to giving up on him.

One day he came to class with his arm in a cast. I'd planned a writing assignment for the day, one that was based on the five-sentence paragraph structure that is often taught as a foundation for expository writing. With a smirk, Enrique pointed to his cast and said he couldn't write. I told him he could dictate to me and I would write. For most of the period, he and I worked together as I asked him for a topic sentence, and then for supporting sentences, and finally for a concluding sentence. He relaxed, shook off the veneer of surliness, and talked his way through a really solid paragraph.

I was stunned and intrigued. We worked together like that a number of times before his cast came off, and I learned that although he had come to the U.S. a year and a half earlier with his mother, they were no longer together. Rather, he was living with his grandmother because his mother had remarried. Her new husband was a member of an infamous gang, and she had moved to the Bronx to be with him. Enrique's grandmother had persuaded her daughter that the children (Enrique and his little sister) would be better off away from the city, living with her.

Just knowing his story helped me work more successfully with Enrique, because I could honor the child who had been uprooted and then abandoned. Believing in him happened a couple of months after the cast was removed. I came across him in town one Saturday; by that time we were on very cordial terms. He was carrying his little sister, a four-year-old. He explained they had walked a lot that day and she was tired. The tenderness with which he held her, the affection that modulated his voice as he spoke to her, and the look of absolute trust in her eyes struck me profoundly. What I saw was family responsibility assumed gladly, and the ability to give and accept love in a way that was mature far beyond his years. I believe in him now. Now I respect him deeply. I honor him very deeply.



Frances Manuel is ninety-four years old, and has spent her life preserving the Tohono O’odham culture and language, and doing what she can to see that the younger members of the community are aware of, and value, their heritage. (Manuel and Neff. 2001.) Preserving their cultural heritage is extremely important to the Tohono O’odham. They are a people who are perhaps unique in this country. Although their tribal lands have shrunk because of government encroachment, the land they are still allowed to claim has belonged to their ancestors for at least 8,000 years (Nabhan, 1982, p. 103). Their land is the Sonoran Desert, harsh terrain where months of drought are rarely broken, and then only by brief spasms of torrential rains. Their cultural treasures contribute to their survival in this hostile region, and include ancient and sophisticated methods of run-off farming that have made their continued desert existence possible (Nabhan, pp. 124-125).

Addressing how important the past is to her people, Frances Manuel explained the word *hu’huk* to me. “My grandfather said that if you don’t learn in the time, and you go on and jump back, then you know what you don’t know, and then you find out what you never learned.” She said that *hu’huk* means what we lose when we lose a culture. “That’s what they call it when an old man dies. They put him in the ground. Everything now is buried, put in and put on top ...and so they call [it] *hu’huk*. That’s what they say, *hu’huk*, a word that says he’s going to be buried and then we’ll be ...looking for it, and we can’t find it” (Park, p. 13). Later, I asked Lillian for further clarification on this one word that expressed such a wealth of cultural consciousness. She said “If you don’t talk to your elders and learn what they have to pass on, *hu’huk* means ‘it’s all gone’” (Park, p. 13).

As I pondered the concept of *hu’huk*, I began to think more and more of the history of my own family and the role teaching has played in it. Of the five cousins who comprise my generation, there are four teachers. Both my paternal grandparents were teachers; in fact they met when my grandmother was my grandfather’s student, and married some years later. The family mythology is replete with legends of teaching adventures, but it was my Aunt Hettie’s teaching philosophy that came to mind most frequently and most clearly as I recalled the words of Frances Manuel.

Having celebrated her ninety-ninth birthday in 2004, Aunt Hettie is the

oldest of the living teachers in the family. She says, “You can’t teach a child unless you love him, and you can find something to love in every child.”

For his painful experience of life, I honored Enrique. But it was seeing how he took care of his little sister that revealed that nugget of gold that was Aunt Hettie’s “something.”

The word “love,” in English, says many things. It can mean the emotional connection between family members or lovers, but it can also mean the emotional bond between people who share experiences less intimate, but still deeply meaningful.

Having attended to *bu’huk*, as Frances Manuel adjured, I found myself thinking that Verna’s “honor,” and Aunt Hettie’s “love” were somehow related. I followed this course of thought through a number of permutations. Perhaps they weren’t synonyms. Perhaps the question was a matter of different degrees, in terms of the intensity of the emotion? Or the difference between a relationship of individuals and a relationship of communities? As I represent the teaching community, am I bound to my students as they represent the community of learners? I found that “love” and “believe” are etymological relatives, kindred through a common Old English root (Partridge, p 343). Here is another legacy from the past, another way to be mindful of *bu’huk*, offering a new thread to the web of meaning. I felt it indicated that my primary focus as a teacher should be to believe in my students and to treasure their abilities.

Andrea was a quiet, fragile-looking girl, an eighth grader who was always pleasant, always polite. From that perspective, she was a joy to have in class. I was deeply troubled, however, by her academic progress. She seemed disengaged, totally uninterested. Conversations with her, during which I tried to probe for footholds that would help her gain purchase as she scaled the wall of academics, proved fruitless.

One day I stopped to chat with the art teacher as he mounted a display of student work. The elegant composition and bright colors of one piece caught my eye. I commented that the work was extremely sophisticated for a middle schooler. He said, “She’s one of your students, Andrea, and she’s very talented.” And there, in Andrea’s artistic strength, I was sure lay the key to her academic progress.

In ESL science class, we were about to launch an inquiry into the periodic table. As I prepared to teach it, I found I was often as intrigued by the visual pattern as by the data. Here, perhaps, was an opportunity for Andrea. We could create a banner of the periodic table, representing the work of each student. I divided the class into groups according to gases, liquids, and solids, and assigned research parameters for each element. Groups worked collaboratively to create 4" x 6," brightly colored paper cells in which information about each element was recorded. Another student, one whose leadership and organizational abilities were quite strong, oversaw the flow of work. Andrea was the artistic director, making sure that students were using the appropriate colors, that labeling was consistent if not identical, and that each separate cell contributed to the whole in a complementary way. She also took charge when it came to assembling the banner, gluing each element cell against a black background.

The final product was a striking paper banner that was ten feet wide and six feet high, and from a distance looked rather like an intricately patterned patchwork quilt or a huge granny square afghan. It attracted a tremendous amount of attention: the chair of the Language Department featured it in a presentation to the Board of Education, and a photograph of the students and the banner appeared in the local newspaper.

It was a breakthrough for Andrea. The reinforcement of her strength, and the academic recognition it brought her, as well as the recognition of her peers who had accepted her as a leader, were all extremely important. Perhaps more valuable, though, was that she began to understand science in a new way, through her own lens, a lens that was situated according to her own abilities. As that year unfolded, she and I often talked about how she could use her strengths to better understand the content of all her classes. Having tasted success, she was hungry for more. That hunger led her to want to succeed. Her experience of achievement led her to know that she could.

Danny Lopez is acknowledged as a public spokesperson for the Tohono O'odham, and has talked about his people's heritage, culture, and language in *The New York Times* (Raver. 2000) and on National Public Radio (<http://www.pbs.org/saf/1110/hotline/hlopez.htm>). His primary audience, howev-

er, is his own community, where he is so highly esteemed that whenever I mentioned my ethnographic work to a member of the Tohono O’odham Nation, the inevitable response was, “Did you talk to Danny Lopez?” He advises the youth of his community “not to be like anybody else” (Park, p. 16), but to understand their tribal identity and to develop their personal identities within the communal consciousness.

His message is powerful: like the messages of Verna Enos, Frances Manuel, and Aunt Hettie, it has become part of the fabric I’ve woven as I think about how to be a better teacher. This is fertile territory for questions, which arise in abundance as each new thread contributes to the fabric. Each question evokes answers, and each answer elicits new questions. Many of these questions revolve around retaining, maintaining, and sustaining identity. Doesn’t protecting and nurturing that core of self (Trueba, 1990) provide the center of gravity necessary to vigorous inquiry and broad explorations of new intellectual regions? How can I help my students retain the identity they bring with them to this country, and how do I help them safeguard their knowledge and understanding of who they are as they continue the path of development in their new home? What can I do to help prevent the tragedies that occur all too often when self is denied, when knowledge is undervalued, when integrity is ignored?

Here is one answer. It is not the only answer, I’m sure. If I could spend months talking with the elders who shared their wisdom with me, I might have other answers. If I could spend years, I might understand a dozen more. This is my first answer, but it isn’t even mine. It is theirs, the Tohono O’odham elders, and my Aunt Hettie’s.

Honoring an ability cannot stop at differentiating classroom practice. Believing in someone cannot stop at differentiation, either. The process of differentiation is a beginning, one in which the teacher offers students different points of entry into content area knowledge in order to provide learning opportunities that are congruent with students’ strengths and learning styles. However, beyond differentiation lies the application of methodology that helps students learn to differentiate for themselves. They must be able to approach any new learning on their own and without the scaffolding that comes from another person. They must

be able to approach it secure in the knowledge that they can use their own strengths and identities to erect a unique scaffolding which will make learning accessible to them. They must formulate their own questions, to which we, their teachers, must listen intently. And then, if we have given them the right tools, we will be able to respond with the best of all answers, for they will be the students' answers.

There is an irony in the story of a journey that started with *feign*, a word that expresses the inauthentic, and ended with a deeper understanding of how to recognize the authentic core of who my students are in order to honor them and to become a better teacher. In some ways, I feel the journey took me to a point exactly opposite of where I started; in other ways, it seems I've come full circle, and that's certainly an irony as well. Just as irony in literature is a device for uncovering greater truths, perhaps in the teaching journey I've taken it was a compass that guided me away and then pointed me home.

I hope that Danny Lopez will smile and nod when he learns the path I've taken, and that it has led me to seek voices that arise from my students' personal and cultural identities. I hope Frances Manuel will look with tolerance on the way in which *hu'buk* has become part of my personal lexicon. I hope that Verna Enos and Lillian Fayuant will understand and accept the ways in which I've used a tenet from the Tohono O'odham culture to help me make sense of my own. And I hope my Aunt Hettie will never stop finding things to love in all of us who are her students.

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