HUMANIZING (MULTI)LITERACY TEACHING: A STARTER KIT TO RENEWED HOPE

Alexandra Babino, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Amidst standardized testing pressures, zero-tolerance discipline policies, and increasingly distressing news headlines, this article seeks to encourage teachers that want to be and feel more human in their work with students with practical, classroom tools. It's a starter kit of sorts that has allowed the author to move beyond the inevitable institutional status quo and toward a renewed hope through "armed love" (Freire, 1998, p. 41). It begins with a brief exploration of humanizing literacy practices and continues with two deceptively simple but potentially transformative tools: naming students and expanding definitions of literacy.

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Being a teacher can feel overwhelming at times. But I don't have to tell you that. What you—and I really want to know is how we can move forward with integrity. The fact is we oftentimes find ourselves perpetuating beliefs and policies we don't actually agree with: we look our precious students in the eyes, fearing we are doing more harm than good. And it's no wonder with the pernicious thrum of the standardized testing calendar, the zero-tolerance school discipline policies, or what feels like a paltry response to the latest heinous news headline. Instead, I imagine we crave more robust definitions of what counts as literacy success; school practices that honor the nuances of individuals and their histories; and spaces for an honest reckoning of societal atrocities. In short, we want to empower our students to be their full selves critically and with care. We want to feel human again and treat our students the same.

Wherever you find yourself in your career, I offer you some of the enduring practices that have served me in my 13 years as a bilingual literacy teacher. It's a starter kit of sorts that has allowed me to move beyond the inevitable institutional status quo and toward a renewed hope through "armed love" (Freire, 1998, p. 41). It begins with a brief exploration of humanizing literacy practices and continues with two deceptively simple but potentially transformative tools: naming students and expanding definitions of literacy.

WHAT ARE HUMANIZING LITERACY PRACTICES?
Humanizing literacy practices are those that focus on the full human in literacy learning; these practices name and position students as multidimensional individuals with voice who desire choice, employing a variety of tools to make meaning—with care (Freire, 1970; 1974; Salazar, 2013; Valenzuela, 1999). This means that teachers use culturally relevant pedagogies that relate to and build on students' cultural, linguistic, and familial resources (Salazar, 2013), instead of just those cultures, languages, and varieties prized by standardized schooling. This teaching honors these resources as inherently valuable in themselves and makes space for students to further cull them. Yet they also explicitly teach students the tools and culture of power.

Furthermore, according to Freire (1970), humanizing pedagogy is a dynamic process between teacher and student who learn in a dialogic relationship; it focuses on critical thinking and problem-posing about their communities and seeks to build student agency to meet these challenges. Subsequently, teachers and students are collaborators and co-learners in classrooms, rejecting the banking model of education where teachers unilaterally deposit knowledge into students' minds. Instead, students have a significant amount of choice in what and how they learn; as agentive individuals they've given space to choose. Taken together, humanizing literacy practices invite students to develop critical consciousness, the ability to acknowledge tensions as well as the ability to act upon those tensions (Freire, 1974), using all of their meaning-make tools, or literacies. In this way naming problems leads to action that seeks to solve problems.

Undoubtedly, undergirding humanizing literacy practices is a pedagogy of care, one that moves beyond feeling (aesthetic care) and moves toward systematic action (authentic care) (Valenzuela, 1999) for its students. Subsequently, this is demonstrated not only in the warm and welcoming environment teachers create for their students, but also "providing support and motivation to reach the goal of ownership" (Stewart, Babino, & Walker, 2017). In sum, it honors the humanity of students at the same time it leads to literacy growth of students that are historically marginalized (López, 2012; Stewart, 2016). While there are numerous ways to enact humanizing pedagogies in the mutli(literacy) classroom, I share two here that teachers can employ to begin to reclaim their humanity.

TOOL 1: NAMING STUDENTS

This tool is especially deceptively simple. Of course, we call students by their names. Or do we? Do we call them by their preferred names with their preferred pronunciations and spellings? While important for all students, calling students by their preferred names is even more necessary for those that are typically minoritized in school systems. The seminal collection of poems My name is Jorge (Medina, 1999) is predicated on Jorge's schooling experience with his teachers' (mis)pronunciation of his name and his ensuing struggles with his Mexican-American identity. Since students' names are closely related to their identities, their names are not just about text; it's about who they are as people. The National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE) had a two-year campaign from 2016-2017 on this very topic: My name, my identity (Learn more at *www.nabe.com/myname*.)

NAMING THEIR WAY

During the first weeks of school, it's helpful to not only call students by their given names, but ask what they prefer to go by and then annotate their preferred pronunciations. Since most of the students I've worked with are Spanish-speaking Latinx youth, I've had to ask which pronunciation they prefer: The anglicized or the Spanish; their full name or a nickname. Believe it or not, they don't all prefer the Spanish pronunciation, which I have personal experience with. My name is "Ale", pronounced in English as "Ali" but retains the Spanish spelling. I distinctly remember my middle school years playing with an anglicized spelling of my name and trying on resulting identities to see if they fit: A-l-i? No. A-l-l-i-e? No again. A-l-y? *Forget it. It's not me.*

In the end, I felt that "Ale", spelled in Spanish but pronounced "Ali" in English more fully represented my Mexican-American identity. This is the practice I continue to this day, even though it usually requires an explanation to those not as familiar with Latinx culture. As teachers, we can facilitate our own students' identity wrestling as we support them in whatever preference for name pronunciation and spelling.

In addition to this is the issue of last names. Many of my Latinx students have two: their father's last name and their mother's last name. Since names are not only related to identities, but to people they love, we want to ask about their preferences. That's an additional way we center students' full individuality as multicultural and multiresourced beings. For this reason, at the beginning of the school year, I always begin by labeling my online data sheets with both students' last names. Then, as we meet in personal conferences during the year, I ask if they have a preference in how they write their last names. Most times, students want to include both because it recognizes and honors their mothers.

POSITIONING AS CONTRIBUTORS

We also center our students' agencies through their names by explicitly calling out the good in them in front of the class with statements like, "Jorge, thank you for being so thoughtful" or "Miriam, what creative thinking! I hadn't thought of that." Additionally, in a writing conference you could say, "Noe, that is such a captivating introduction. I think others would love to hear it. Do you mind sharing it with the class later?" I can't tell you how many times I've uttered a version of this line to receive the response of a tentative and then mega-watt smile, followed by a buoyed confidence as the student shares his/her contribution with the class.

Attaching their name to a specific compliment in front of the class serves several purposes. First is connects students' identities to actions and so encourages an identity of a contributor. So, Jorge is a person who thinks thoughtfully; Miriam is a person who thinks creatively; and Noe is a person who writes captivatingly. Furthermore, it also serves to center their agency. By calling out their good, it names students as worthy contributors in the classroom community, as additional sources of knowledge in contrast to the teacher being the sole arbiter of knowledge. Lastly, as in the example with Noe, we also honor their choices to step out into greater ownership as we ask instead of tell them to share their ideas with the class.

CENTERING THEIR FULL PERSONHOOD

Besides calling students by their preferred names and pronunciations and continuing to build their agency by calling out their notable contributions, another way to humanize the educational experiences of our students is by committing to consistently employ person-first language (American Psychological Association [APA], 2012). This means speaking of the person first, before referring to a label. I know I'm guilty of this and have to make a critical effort to continually practice this belief. Instead of saying "a Latinx student", we can choose to say "a student who is Latinx". Then instead of saying "a middle-class student", we might say "a student who appears to be middle class." It seems and even is cumbersome, but it makes an emphatic point to our colleagues, students, and ourselves that we are people first.

This person-first, asset perspective should be employed for all students but especially for those students that schools typically labeled with static, deficit terms like "low", "behind", or "remedial". By labeling them as such we ignore their dynamic agency and ability to grow. Instead, consider using terms like "currently performing at X level" or "striving students" (Fink, 2006). Each focuses not just on the person first, but also on the aspirational nature of their humanity: it acknowledges both where they currently are and where they could be going.

Taken a step further, becoming more humane in our literacy practices with students with a person-first, asset orientation includes the terms we use when talking about and to our students who are typically labeled English Learners (ELs). While the term can be helpful in identifying potential educational needs of our students, other scholars argue that it "conceals more than it reveals" (Martínez, 2018, p. 515). That is, it only acknowledges part of our students; they possess far more literacy and language abilities than the term denotes. While students with this label may be emerging in their standardized English proficiencies, they may demonstrate a wealth of knowledge and proficiencies in other languages. In turn, an alternative to talking about and to our students as ELs, we can call them emergent bilinguals or simply bi/multilinguals. In doing so, we acknowledge all of their linguistic and cultural resources and so create a place for a fuller (and more accurate) view of their humanity.

TOOL 2: EXPANDING DEFINITION OF LITERACY
A humanizing orientation toward literacy views people as individuals and centers their agency, yet it also takes a multifaceted view of their meaning-makes tools, or literacies, as well. In terms of literacy teaching, it means moving beyond the reified definitions of literacy with the standardized school varieties of reading and writing and instead culling students' dynamic linguistic and cultural repertoires (García, 2009; Salazar, 2013). Put another way, it means including other literacies besides the writing and reading performed on standardized tests. It includes all the oral literacies (listening and speaking) and visual literacies (viewing and representing images) our students possess, as well as their language varieties (rural, Chicano, or African American vernacular English) in however many languages they speak. While a full exploration of the multiple literacies of students is outside the scope of this work, a few ideas for humanizing multiple literacies follow:

1. **Call it out.** When you see students using other forms of literacy, let them know. Call attention to the domain and genre. In my classroom I displayed a chart that includes all the components and type of literacies with their resulting purposes. It was placed by a map of the world, where all members of our classroom could add sticky notes of ways we used our literacies to change the world—no matter how big or small. Some literacies to call out includes dichos [sayings], oral histories, hip-hop literacies, as well as visual and digital literacies. This can also be done in reverse through more standardized literacies; we can call out standardized literacies as one of many forms with valid meaning. For instance, around state testing time, I would remind my students that this kind of reading or writing was a genre and the test was merely one way to demonstrate what they know on these particular genres. When

placed against the backdrop of a year's worth of naming various literacies, teachers can create a classroom culture that aims to interrupt the dominant school culture of standardized languages, literacies, and testing.

2. **Connect it.** Apart from calling out students' various forms of literacy, connect it to more standardized forms of literacy to compare and contrast its features. What are its specific features that make it unique? How is it additive, creative, and life-giving? This takes the previous strategy a step further by inviting a close reading of each genre's form. Doing so not only centers more marginalized literacies, but also enhances their nuances as students analyze the purposeful form of each one. Furthermore, you're also developing a greater metalinguistic awareness in students, what they know about language. As a bilingual literacy teacher, I used a form of Escamilla and colleagues' (2014) Asi se dice [It's said like this]. Using color-coding on a chart, we'd write how we'd say a sentence or phrase in Spanish and then collectively discuss how we could communicate that same idea in English. Subsequently, this practice further humanizes (multi)literacy teaching, as it positions the students and teacher as equal contributors considering multiple expressions using all of their linguistic and cultural resources. Even if not bilingual, literacy teachers can create space for student dialogue using all of their languages. Flint, Dollar, and Stewart (2018) discuss how monolingual teachers can leverage all of their students' literacies through heart maps, all about me presentations, and graffiti boards.

3. **Purposely plan for it:** Knowing the ebb of flow of the standardized testing schedule, you can preemptively plan pockets of time—whether they be days or weeks when you highlight a specific genre or incorporate additional literacies. The beginning of the school year, before holiday breaks, and after state testing are definite times to plan for an intentional inclusion of multiple literacies. One way I aimed to plan for multiple literacies was to invite students to take their more standardized writing practice and move their ideas to video form or a cartoon series; another practice I implemented after standardized testing season was to invite students to make an anthology of their writing over multiple genres, talking with them in individual conferences about their favorite pieces over the school year and what they might want to try next. When combined with the previous strategy, teachers validate multiple literacies in multiple languages using student choice and agency over the course of the school year.

CONCLUSION

Teachers and students can feel human again when we encourage one another with practical tools to leverage the power have in the classroom. We can honor students' multifaceted individuality by calling them by their names, their way. We affirm their identities as contributors through calling out their contributions, and we acknowledge their full personhood by using person-first, asset-based terminology about and with our students that focus on their aspirational desires. Just like father of critical, humanizing pedagogy, Paulo Freire (1970, 1998), we position and provide space for our students to name tensions and contradictions, but we also invite them to act on these tensions. With armed love, we can recognize and empower our students—no matter how small these acts may seem—to leverage their multiple literacies and multifaceted identities. It's admittedly a beginning, but it's a beginning towards humanizing (multi)literacy teaching and renewing our own hope.

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AUTHOR

Alexandra Babino, Assistant Professor, Texas A&M-Commerce, *alexandra.babino@tamuc.edu*