

## Book Review

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*La Clase Mágica: Imagining Optimal Possibilities in a Bilingual Community of Learners*, by Olga Vásquez. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003. 237 pp. Pb. \$27.50

Multilingual and multicultural education has been proposed as a means of connecting home and school contexts, thus attempting to combat educational inequity and minority underrepresentation in university settings (Freeman, 1998, 2000; Hornberger, 2003; Moll & Díaz, 1985; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda, 1999). In *La Clase Mágica: Imagining Optimal Possibilities in a Bilingual Community of Learners*, Vásquez presents a vibrant example of culturally responsive pedagogy and details the recursive process in designing and implementing a bilingual and bicultural program with a social justice agenda. Vásquez provides a multivoiced, living account of an ongoing after-school project called *La Clase Mágica* [The Magic Class], which aims to challenge dominant ideological perspectives of language, ethnicity, and identity as tied to educational access. Both the program and Vásquez's text seek to disrupt dominant notions by "collapsing the paradox" (p. 114) and providing an alternative space where dichotomies are conceptualized in fluid terms and where border crossing (between cultures, languages, generations, socioeconomic class, and educational settings) is reconstructed as a resource.

*La Clase Mágica* is a cultural and linguistic adaptation of an after-school computer project called the Fifth Dimension, which entailed a radical reconceptualization of the program and its role in the *Mexicano* community. *La Clase Mágica* represents a partnership between the University of California, San Diego, and a small Roman Catholic mission in the vicinity of the campus, with the goal of "support[ing] an after-school educational activity designed to optimize the learning potential of bilingual elementary school children of Mexican descent" (p. 12). The after-school component is paired with an undergraduate course in child development emphasizing Vygotskian concepts of *scaffolding* and *zone of proximal development*. As part of a required field

experience, undergraduates volunteer at *La Clase Mágica*, collaborating in meaning-making with participants and acting as ethnographers to document the activities of the program. *La Clase Mágica* also embodies collaboration between the university, parents, and community members. From the onset, these community members were involved in designing the program, running weekly sessions, and taking charge of implementation. This meaningful collaboration disrupts traditional power relationships between community and university settings, creating an alternate space where such relationships can be more equitably reimagined.

It is in part the blending of fantasy and reality through the medium of technology that allows for the creation of a space where alternative ideologies can flourish. Children playing computer games are presented with a series of artifacts that place them in the role of decision makers and create opportunities to utilize bilingual and bicultural resources. Children navigate a maze, and through this layout, they must make continual decisions about which room to enter, what level game to play, and which language(s) and culture(s) to draw on in their interactions with this virtual world. The rooms and activities in the maze are structured to encourage participants to make use of their linguistic and cultural repertoires; thus, for instance, untranslated tasks incorporate multiple varieties of Spanish and English and are based on *Mexicano* community experiences. Movement in this fantastical world is mediated by the virtual entity called *El Maga* [The Wizard], an “it,” which communicates with participants via e-mail or live chat, asking questions about progress through the maze, providing encouragement, and personally interacting with participants in a *madrina* [mentor] role. *El Maga* also chats with undergraduate students and researchers, serves as a link between different Fifth Dimension sites, and wields authority in the “real world.” In one instance, *El Maga* declared its death because its call for commentary on the sociopolitical implications of a violent story went unanswered in the consortium listserv. *El Maga*’s ideological convictions resulted in the real consequence of withdrawal, and it was the persistent letter writing of the children that brought it back to “life.”

*El Maga* embodies *La Clase Mágica*’s challenge of dominant norms; the construct is a linguistic ambiguity, pairing the male article *el* with the female noun for *wizard*, thus deliberately breaking with convention. Vásquez describes how, when faced with difficulties in designing and implementing *La Clase Mágica*, participants worked to radically change expectations, interactions, and power relations in a recursive process. For instance, *La Clase Mágica* was deliberately constructed as a nonschool setting, but Vásquez found that school relationships were unconsciously being reproduced by children and undergraduates through a naming process. Children would call the undergraduates “*maestro/a* [teacher],” and the undergraduates would refer to children as “students” and themselves as “tutors.” This dynamic was

ruptured and transformed through a deliberate linguistic shift: Undergraduates officially became “*amigos* [friends],” and this nomenclature freed them to enact more collaborative, playful identities with the children. As Vásquez demonstrates, bilingual and bicultural children were often experts in the interaction with undergraduates: Their familiarity with the maze and with the linguistic and cultural funds of knowledge became an asset for making sense of the tasks and allowed children to work in conjunction with adults, who could bring more traditional literacy practices to the interactions.

Throughout the text, Vásquez shrouds *El Maga* with secrecy. The decision not to elucidate on its technical workings bestows *El Maga* with an air of mystique and propagates this living myth. However, as a virtual construct whose interactions are dictated by (one would assume) Vásquez and others, *El Maga*, with its lack of concrete information, obscures the human subjectivity behind the virtual artifact. Presenting this entity without fully uncovering the people and details behind the interactions creates the illusion of an authoritative truth that also needs to be challenged.

Vásquez successfully highlights the complexity inherent in designing, maintaining, and documenting a multilayered, multivoiced program like *La Clase Mágica*. Her text compliments program characteristics: In one section, Vásquez presents methodology in a maze format and follows an imagined “Researcher–Friend” through ethnographic work and data interpretation, a technique that mirrors participation in *La Clase Mágica* and disrupts dominant academic narratives. Vásquez’s text is a living, breathing example of the intricacies and multiplicity of (re)designing culturally responsive pedagogy. This riveting account serves as a model of continual commitment to social justice and its potential effect on educational and societal equity.

## References

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