

Home > A Dialogue Across Time, Space, and Perspective Saturday evening conversation between Kris Gutiérrez and Ray McDermott at the 2002 Ethnography in Education Research Forum, moderated by Dr. Nancy H. Hornberger of the University of Pennsylvania

A DIALOGUE ACROSS TIME, SPACE, AND PERSPECTIVE SATURDAY EVENING CONVERSATION BETWEEN KRIS GUTIÉRREZ AND RAY MCDERMOTT AT THE 2002 ETHNOGRAPHY IN EDUCATION RESEARCH FORUM, MODERATED BY DR. NANCY H. HORNBERGER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Kris Gutiérrez and Ray McDermott

Editor's note: This is a transcript of a conversation between Ray McDermott and Kris Gutiérrez at the 2002 Ethnography in Education Forum at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education. The transcript has been edited for clarity. However, some portions were difficult to transcribe and are marked with an [].

NANCY HORNBERGER: We have Kris Gutiérrez from UCLA and Ray McDermott from Stanford. Unlike our conversationalists in the past who have known each other and worked together for many years, Kris and Ray met each other for the first time this afternoon. They have read each other's work and followed each other's work. So, part of the trick of this conversation today, I think, is going to be to stop them, because they have so many questions and things they want to talk about. We had a little dry run a couple of hours ago and I can tell you that there are lots of things that they want to talk about. We get the benefit of eavesdropping.

So, with no further ado then, we are going to turn to our conversation. My first question is: what brought you to your interest in looking ethnographically at learning? Totally spontaneously, you will respond -

RAY MCDERMOTT: So, I was a grade school teacher and I had the smart kids in my class and everybody else thought that they were stupid. And then I got to think that those people were kind of stupid. Somebody didn't understand what was going on. So I became interested in showing how those kids, were in fact, smart. My dissertation became *Kids Make Sense* because the kids in the class I picked, some of the kids, in addition to not being called smart, some of those kids were not being called sane or various other things. So, to me, the discovery was to show that there was order, exquisite order in their behavior. Exquisite order that others couldn't see because the others were organizing things in ways that if you responded systematically to it, you looked a little bit . . . It all seemed like a terrible plot. So, kids make sense and behind it there was a subtext that I got from law of anthropology saying that everyone is smart, but there was something wrong with that.

So, now we're talking about the late 1970s, and then I wound up in Michael Cole's lab with people like Luis, Jean, Warren Simmons. Everybody came through there - it's quite amazing. We all worked on the problem of what is smart, all with an eye toward saying everybody is smart. But, I think in the last ten years I am increasingly interested in getting all those questions off the table. They are all losing questions in a lot of ways. Of course everybody is smart - so smart that you don't even have to organize conditions to make them look better or look smart. You have to organize conditions so that no one even thinks about that question. That would be the foreground of ideal social thinking. That's what brought me into the classroom in the first place and it's what keeps me out of classrooms now, to be honest.

KRIS GUTIÉRREZ: Let me say first that when I heard the question, I thought that I must be nuts to be up here with Ray, but I thought selfishly that this would be a wonderful opportunity to get to know him. So, I have many ulterior motives in coming here. In some ways we share - I have been reading his work for years, and when we were talking, we realized many similar orientations. Mine is slightly different in that it took me until I got to college to figure out that people didn't think Latinos were smart. Because I came from a school where lots of us achieved and had a very high college bound rate. It was a migrant town and there were lots of fourth and fifth generation Latinos who were achieving. There's a good ecological explanation for it that I won't go into now. (Luis has convinced me that it would make a good study some time.) But it really took me going to college and realizing that I was the only Latina, the only Chicana, as an English major in all of my classes. It was that experience that started to raise these questions about how we weren't supposed to be able to speak well, to think well. It just really flew in the face of my own experience and, of course, as an English major, I got put onto every national board possible because they thought there were only two of us - Roseann Rosales and I. It really started shaping my own desire for the kinds of things that I wanted to study.

So I ended up studying Rhetoric and Composition Theory that at that time came out of a very different model. It was very cognitive oriented. So I went to places like Carnegie Mellon to really study these cognitive models. At that time there was an emerging school right across the street at Pitt with David Bartholome and Tony Petrosky. They used to come and get me at night and take me out and give me lots of wine so that they could deprogram me of the effects of being at Carnegie Mellon all day long. I started thinking of all these studies. I had to work - I didn't have the luxury not to work because I was a single parent; my son was three. I had to work full time so I directed an academic support program for what Jerry [unclear] calls "severely labeled students." So I worked with those students and wanted to study them but because of the tradition I was in with the cognitive models, I started to think about protocols. I don't know how I convinced these incredible young men, but I decided to start a study about the basic reading and writing processes of what were called basic writers. And I wanted to find the worst basic writers in the freshman class, who not surprisingly were ethnic minority males, and three out of the four were athletes. And I don't know how I convinced them to come into the lab with me and do think aloud protocols about their writing - it was quite shocking. It was in the midst of this, because of course the cognitive models did not provide any explanatory power; they did not bring anything to what I knew about their histories. Immediately, based on my own experience teaching high school for a year and working with those students, I knew there had to be other explanations.

It really moved me - I discovered Vygotsky when I was in graduate school - and it really moved me to social and cultural understandings of language and human development. Fortunately, my study really moved quickly from think aloud protocols to a really ethnographic study of basic readers and writers, and what all that meant. It went way beyond think aloud protocols into the area of classroom practice. And I really started to think much more about learning, and about the social organization of learning, and the consequences of what happens to students like the ones that I studied who have been in remedial classrooms all of their lives. And, of course, what I found is that they become very good remedial students from being in those contexts. So, a whole lot of what I did was to challenge my own experience and the experiences of the young men and women with whom I worked, and the experience of my friends and family members. So, that was the motivation to keep going.

NANCY HORNBERGER: There is a commonality there that I guess is noticeable in that what you both are really saying is that you got interested through teaching. In teaching, the kids you were working with intrigued you.

RAY MCDERMOTT: Can we take a break from the questions for a minute there and go back to the family?

KRIS GUTIÉRREZ: Because we share family stories . . .

NANCY HORNBERGER: Your family? Sure.

RAY MCDERMOTT: Long before I was a teacher, I'm from a big family and there were a lot of kids around. So I was always playing with kids and I really liked kids and I think that is where some of the emotion came from. Do you want to say some more about the family stuff?

KRIS GUTIÉRREZ: Well, I bring to it my own experience about being a mother as well. And I know that we have shared some stories about our sons and what they have experienced. I always tell 'Scott stories,' it's part of my repertoire. But my son, who is both Latino and African American, who I think is extraordinarily brilliant, had very different experiences as he moved through different school systems moving from Boulder to California. So, I knew that here was my son with all sorts of important cultural capital, very literate, very articulate, but that race seemed to play an important role in how he was defined as a student and as a reader. I have many funny literacy stories about how I constantly had to mediate that. But it just made me want to study these issues so much more because I knew that I had all the resources and my son had all these experiences. What did it mean for all of the children who didn't have obnoxious mothers like me who were always in the school system's face and telling them just how brilliant my son was? Those stories I think permeate what I continue to do.

NANCY HORNBERGER: Is there anything that you want to say?

RAY MCDERMOTT: The wonder of kids that I learned about when I was little and the terror that kids were put under in my class was certainly a great contrast. And then the things that I had to do to make things wonderful for kids were so hard that something had to be wrong. Often that came into my experiences as a parent and the various challenges that my kids have had. I have one son who basically quit school in the second grade; somewhere when he was around 14 I had to decide to be a father or a person who yelled at him all day long about school, and then things got better. He recovered from all that and is now a chef and teaches people stuff. But it was all recovery work and it shouldn't have had to be recovery work.

A couple of years ago I wrote a paper about it that I think brought it full circle for me, or this story did. I wrote a paper once, [unclear] had me write a paper once about my parents' literacy, just a couple of pages. My parents did a lot of literacy but they

weren't school people. I mean, they were born in 1904, and working class people didn't do a lot of school work. They did responsibilities, and they did hard work, and they did taking care of the family. And parts of that I found that were literacy, like reading the newspaper riding back and forth from work. For my mother, kids were always in the house. My mother, in particular, was always hungry for any news, anything.

After that, I wrote up my generation and we used literacy to kick ass essentially, so it wasn't just stuff that when you needed it, you went and got it, but you showed it off. I'm like the fastest footnote on the other side of the Mississippi because all of my brothers live on this side. And that's what we do, we trade footnotes. I'm not sure it's a healthy life, but you know.

Then [I wrote] about my children's generation and they began chasing down expensive diagnoses with scales and tests and they don't go fast enough or this or that. And my one son who is extremely talented just said no and decided to fight. It was very hard, and so I wrote this paper and I worked it through with him a lot and it was extremely interesting. He was writing a lot of poetry at the time and so I put some of his poems in there. I actually wrote it for my mother - she was 96 by the time I gave it to her. I made a big print copy for her and I said, "Here, I want you to read this." She had read the part about her before and she liked that but now this was the next two generations. So, I went out for a couple of hours and when I got back she was just turning over the last page. And she said, "I hope that no one is going to see this." And, I said, "Why?" She said, "'Cause I don't like story about Brendan." I said, "Well, we've been working this through." And she said, "No, if people could be mean to him when he was a nice little boy, they could be mean to him now when he is grown up. I don't want people to know the story of what it was like for him in the second grade." This still sits in my files. My son is, I think he is finished with it, but it turned out that all I've done in these thirty years is do what my mother did all the time. And that is to defend little kids against this and to say that those pressures can't come in to the family. I was really quite dazzled at how much I had been on assignment for all those years.

KRIS GUTIÉRREZ: Those contradictions certainly bring up for me - I always say that I am a Vygotskian by day and a behaviorist at night - because you just have to.

NANCY HORNBERGER: In what you just said you suggested that you are at a different point now. So the second question that I have for you both is how your interests and perspectives have changed over time. So, I don't know which one of you wants to take that up first but . . .

KRIS GUTIÉRREZ: Well, some people would say that I am schizophrenic but I see myself as a boundary crosser. I really insert myself in multiple communities because I wasn't satisfied that a certain field would help me to answer questions. It certainly didn't as someone who studied writing and literacy. And so, I find myself as part of - some people say to me "Oh, you're an anthropologist, just give up." That's what they say. And I find myself being in communities, trying to be in communities, trying to push myself, push my thinking into much more complex understanding. So, that in itself is interdisciplinary training that provides a much richer theoretical or mythological tool kit has really helped me to make sense of my work as I have hopefully developed over time.

If I had to talk about a trajectory, I went into this to study classrooms. I still feel that it is very important to be in the classroom even though I understand the reason not to. I remember Shirley Heath telling me that she was so excited when she found out that I was studying after school programs because she said that I was finally out of those awful classrooms. But I'm not, but I think that I have different reasons for being in there. I went in initially to study literacy practices and make sense of the writing process. And I was really interested in, I was doing all of this work with traditional student populations, but I found that all of a sudden, English Language Learners were being subjected to lots of these methodologies without a lot of empirical evidence that they worked. And that troubled me. So as I went into study pedagogies that I thought were very robust, the writing process, et cetera, et cetera, what I found were these completely contradictory, competing practices and really helped me to develop this archaeology of reform mentality because I would see something like writing process over here and then Distar over here. The very same classrooms were doing them but I thought there have to be these larger explanations for this. So really this notion archaeology of reform has allowed me to just think that if you peel away the top layer, all the old reforms are still there and never gone away. What I found of course, is that it wasn't teachers' fault but that it is because of the social organization of teaching, the way teachers' lives are, that they would keep piling on reform on top of reform without the space, energy or activities to help them make sense of it. It really helped me to think about things in very different ways - this archaeology of reform - in classrooms.

And really now, I can't think about language and literacy without it being a part of reform and policy. So, I think that my work now is very purposefully problem oriented, that I use ethnography to help me make sense of lots of the problems and issues, but unlike traditional anthropology, I don't see my community as a problem. But I like to study the problems that my communities are faced with. So I think that's what allows me to do what I do but for very different reasons. Times are very difficult as Luis wonderfully elaborated last night. The picture is very grim for English Language Learners and the national climate makes it much more difficult and so I don't think I have the luxury of doing anything else than addressing these very oppressive measures. Also, in addition to empirical work that's necessary for us to write these theoretical pieces that address these macro issues. I think a

large, I think that I can get away with this because of the large body of ethnographic work that I have that documents these practices and their consequences. So, that's what I'm trying to do now is take these microanalytic processes that I've documented and try to connect them to these larger issues. And later, I can talk about - I really wanted to torture Ray - I even brought an activity-theory triangle because he says it makes his eyes glaze over.

RAY MCDERMOTT: I think one of the big changes for me is that in true paranoid fashion, my sense of the enemy has changed. It sounds like to you the enemy has shifted, so do you want to explain who the enemy was to you before you were a recovering psychologist.

KRIS GUTIÉRREZ: Being who I am, I don't think that I was ever without . . .

RAY MCDERMOTT: Without an enemy, right

KRIS GUTIÉRREZ: Let's say 'the enemy,' but I think my focus was much more about making sense of it locally. Really trying to make sense of it locally in classroom practices. I still think those are of value but they are [not] valuable unless they are connected to larger activity systems.

RAY MCDERMOTT: Do you every have the sense that a lot of the problems in the classroom were just a mistake? That there were nice people with nice kids who just got on the kids nerves? You never got that?

KRIS GUTIÉRREZ: I was a classroom teacher, so you know, I knew how clever teachers had to be to sustain the kind of energy that they have to have.

NANCY HORNBERGER: I was just thinking that it might be helpful if you could talk a little bit about some of the problems that you are working on, to kind of put a context around some of the abstract. To this point we have been abstract, but if you could just . .

KRIS GUTIÉRREZ: Well, I have all ready . . . it's not a triangle. [She displays an audiovisual that details the work of the Center for the Study of Urban Literacies] I'm real remedial so some of the circles don't really look like circles. But it's not about the work. I just wanted to put something up there because when I talk about one thing, they all seem to blend into other issues and so. But we are studying Policy 227 and we have really been studying how this constellation of policies in California - 227, the SAT-9, the new high school exit exam (which we predict over 50% of the students taking it will fail and be retained). I think that it is so funny that with the problem of social promotion, no one ever thinks that good instruction is the answer, but retention is. It's also ironic because there are very few things that there is a lot of consensus around in the education literature and that is one thing that there is a lot of consensus around, but still we do retention. So we have work that is dealing with - again all using ethnographic methods - Policy 227, studying coaching which again is the most prevalent for teacher development right now in the country. We just finished a study on that.

But you also have to have these spaces that allow you to design the kinds of utopian projects that you think about. Mine is the Fifth Dimension, Las Redes, which means networks and it is an after school computer club that I can talk about later. And then we do this migrant education program that brings in high achieving students of migrant farming backgrounds for high school and they spend a residential summer with us. So those are places that are not - they are actually areas of study but they are not - but they also are ways for us to design the things we want to do. And teacher preparation that I will be talking about later. I'm also part of the Sloan Foundation Center called Everyday Lives of Working Families, so that's why it is over there on the side because it is an interdisciplinary project with anthropologists and some psychologists and myself at UCLA. That just gives you a real overview of what I'm working on. They call my office the Den of Multitasking.

NANCY HORNBERGER: Well, we're going to come back to some of that, but first, Ray do you want to say something about the projects that you have been working on?

RAY MCDERMOTT: I want to talk all about that [At this point, he turns the overhead projector back on and refers to Kris Gutiérrez's chart]. In some ways, this is a little bit scary. On my first day in graduate school back in 1970 in the Anthropology of Man, I met the chair of the department. He said, "So, you've been doing a lot of work in education. You've been teaching." And I said, "Yeah, and I'm about ready to give that up." And then every September for about twenty years after that, I gave it up. And then about 1990 I gave it up for real and here we are twelve years later.

There must be something in the water because there was a group of other people who were working on working families and

trying to find out about the math issue which is colossal. Instead of trying to help figure out to families to teach their kids math we wanted to find out how they handled math so that we could make interesting materials so that they could find out how smart they are. And they overwhelmed us. If a kid has to go to prom and there is \$200 to do it, they wind up with the dress, the hair, the nails, and the big stretch limos with about \$20 left over. And how do they do that? It takes a colossal amount of figuring and energy. So we were able to find a bunch of families and we were able to record them doing these kinds of maths, and that was really exciting. I always get dragged kicking and screaming - because I always think that once and for all I know how to do it - on teacher preparation, and Lynne gave a paper here yesterday on our effort to get race front and center in our teacher education program. And we end up - is falling on our face fair?- getting dragged through the mud along the way. And I'm up to my ears in the Fifth Dimension; I have to help write one of the papers for the Fifth Dimension this year.

KRIS GUTIÉRREZ: So, this is your life too?

RAY MCDERMOTT: Yeah, this turns out to be . . . Someone should change the water. But, there are some other things that I have always wanted to do, and when people aren't locking me out of my office, and I'm in my office, I get to do some of that. So, I just want to show you one of those, because I just spent nine months on it [A transparency of some of Marx's writing is displayed]. It's been a hideous amount of fun and this is the first paragraph of a paper written in 1844, by a guy who had a complaint. He woke up one morning and he had been reading Adam Smith. Adam Smith says if you do a lot of labor, you get a lot of products, you produce a lot and then you will be rich. This other guy whose name is Karl Marx went around town and looked at everybody and found that the people working the hardest actually had the least. Go figure! And so he called that a strange labor, that is a labor that the more you did, the less you had. The more you did, the more that people took from you. That sounded familiar and I wondered if that had something to do with education.

So, this labor called "The Strange Labor," Gene Laver took it and we crossed off the word 'labor,' and wrote in the word 'learning.' And then we want to see how the dominoes go. We are proceeding from the premise that you have to cross off political economy and then what do you put in instead, if the paper is going to be about strange learning? [Someone from the audience suggests "Schools"] Schools, or you can put in the 'educational establishment,' or if you want to have some real fun, you can put in 'Ed Psych.' So there is no, it's already not an exact science, but you put in a word and you see where it goes. Well, we got most of the data, we went through all 13 pages of the translation and it took us I don't know how many hours. I guess it took us nine months. So, we accepted that language is a loss [Professor McDermott goes through parts of the transparency substituting words]. What about individual property? Could be individual learning, inherent intelligence, your IQ, all those things. And now it turns out that because we have commodified everything in education, it's easy to pick.

It turns out that in 1844, Marx wrote one of the more coherent attacks on the psychological theory of the turn of the millennium. And that is incredibly exciting to me because when I do this, I learn about Marx, but I also learn a lot about - Gene and I had to clarify a lot of our ideas about what we thought about learning. And then the third thing that turns out to be the most exciting of all is that we had to restructure some of the Marx to make it fit and so it turned out that all of the words that we had for production - education doesn't do a lot of production. It does a lot of distribution. So, for the teaching of French, it doesn't matter whether they learn French. They don't learn a lot of French, of course, in American high schools, it's only important that a few people get good grades in French and a lot of people don't and that a whole bunch of people never even get to take French. Now we are talking about distribution and the actual products are somewhat uninteresting to the whole system. For this paper, we're reading James' paper about does consciousness exist, does learning exist. James' answer, very surprising for 1904 - does consciousness exist? No. Don't be ridiculous. Does the conscience exist as a thing? Does the mind exist? Does learning exist? What are you talking about, says William James.

So we have all of these wonderfully radical texts in our history, which if we use them to comment on what we are doing now, turn out to be a vicious indictment of where we are now. And I love doing it through the most traditional mainstream texts. I also love doing it through most alternative texts - there you have to work less hard to get the radical edge. But I like doing both of those things, and that turns out to be the reason that I went into the classroom originally. To find a way to get in the classroom, which was the dumbest place in the world to me, it's the place that nothing happens. But if you take our videotapes often enough to find out what does happen so we could create new ideas. It's the same reason for doing ethnographies when you are going into other countries, et cetera. So, this is a new part of the project.

NANCY HORNBERGER: Well, you've anticipated the question that I was going to ask about what's unique about your approach. That's certainly unique.

RAY MCDERMOTT: It's crazy, that's what it is.

NANCY HORNBERGER: Well, I wanted to ask Kris the same thing now. What's unique about your approach?

KRIS GUTIÉRREZ: I guess I don't think classrooms are inherently boring. I think that they are tremendously exciting. I was real frustrated that people saw classrooms as black boxes. We're so used to studying them diachronically, and so you get the. . . What I tell my students is the "Da-duh, da-duh, da-duh" kind of research. This happened, this happened, and then this happened. And so I think what it called for was opening up the lens so that at any given moment, something was happening that there were dozens of other things happening at that moment in other parts of the classroom. And I think that so often we are oriented into only looking at that one place so it really said to be both theoretically and methodologically that we were missing the most exciting places in the classroom. So, I started really thinking about time and space in the classroom. [Another visual is shown, this time the activity triangle, and Professor Gutierrez jokes to Professor McDermott to turn his head because he won't like this.]

Just to really start thinking about - this is one crude way of thinking about the lens so that you can start seeing that usually we privilege the official spaces of the classroom, or the teacher does or the curriculum does. And that's what we write about most often, that's what most people writing microethnographies about classrooms write about. I was really interested in all of the things that kids were doing outside of those spaces. And not as disruptions but really as making spaces as a response to what was going on in the official spaces. So we started documenting, videotaping, doing analysis, et cetera to really repackage and reframe those spaces in very different ways. And I think that this really changed in a memorable way my thinking about classrooms and what happens to kids who get so disconnected from those classrooms, and what other sense making ideas tools they use and don't use, and that really got us thinking about how to create zones of proximal development. So the third space that we have written a lot about is just another way to think about what Engstrom calls expansive learning or more traditionally is called the zone of proximal development. It is a very different discursive space in the classroom. So I think that was something really unique in our work was trying to see classrooms as activity systems that have various activity systems that are in conflict or in tension. So, I like to focus on those nodes of tension and contradiction because I really do believe that is where we start learning. That attending to instead of ignoring these places of tension and contradiction, we can reframe them and think about tension and contradiction as engines of change. And I think it leads to very different possibilities.

NANCY HORNBERGER: Can you give us an example for those of us who might not have lived in a classroom?

KRIS GUTIÉRREZ: Well, the clearest example is that we came up from this notion of, or borrowed it from the underlife of the classroom, or counterscript. And counterscript was that talk, movement, behavior, body, gesture that students would use that was outside of those official spaces. So, we have documented all of those spaces and what went on in them. We talked about counterscript or what are the moves, the intellectual and discursive work that is needed to really create a different space in the classroom. That's one example of this. I think that our Fifth Dimension is really conceptualized as this third space. I think our migrant program is also one of those third spaces.

RAY MCDERMOTT: Are the other Fifth Dimension programs those third spaces as well?

KRIS GUTIÉRREZ: I think they are all attempts to be those, but I haven't documented them. You know, you evaluated them all.

NANCY HORNBERGER: I think this could be very confusing for anyone who doesn't know what a fifth dimension is.

KRIS GUTIÉRREZ: It's a math problem. The fifth dimension is an after school club that is in a different location. Mine is in a school, some of them are in Boys' and Girls' Clubs or in libraries and other places. They really are alternative spaces that are organized around certain principles of learning and development.

NANCY HORNBERGER: Well one of the things that Kris mentioned is that she looks at time and space and language in a classroom and that was one of the things that we think links the two of you, at least in some ways. Do you want to comment on that? Time, space, and language in relation to learning contexts . . .

RAY MCDERMOTT: That suddenly seems so hard. They are very big words, right? Space, time, and language. Wouldn't it be nice in the front of everybody's report, we had a glossary of what they meant by space, time, and language, or culture, and learning. If they defined those five. And maybe more about what they mean by the identification of the community they are studying and who the hell they think they are. How about those seven? If everybody had to own up to those, I think a lot of very different things would happen. Time is by far the stupidest part of the social sciences that for the most part we have not had time as an active element of our analysis. That is, we've allowed ourselves always to think that things stand still, if only for a second, or a microsecond. So, microanalysis is as dull as macroanalysis if it lets things stand still. I don't generally use the macro - micro distinction because it is a trap. I work hard not to use the words but if there is any great achievement in interactional analysis. These things we call micro is that they are careful to not let any moment, any activity, any behavior every get analyzed without reference to what came before and after reflexively so over some period of time. And if you are not doing that, you are probably

not doing work that is going to make any kind of difference. It's that harsh. John Dewey did it in the reflex arc in 1896 when he said that there was no such thing as a stimulus and there was no such thing as a response; it was simply the anticipation of the other. The response only appears in anticipation of the next stimuli and vice versa. The phenomenologists did it and Marx understood it and all the great traditions have some reflection of this understanding.

It turns out that space is that active also. And language - there is an invitation to let everything freeze until you remember that language is not about reference, it's not about activity. It turns out that reference is a subset of the kinds of things that people do, and a small one at that. So that all of the names that we have for things turn out to be our violence on the world, that's a good place to start. I hope that everything I've written has active versions of all three, but of course, they don't. The faster I write, the less they are cleaned up and everything that we write has to be cleaned up of our own desires and that's just painful and it takes a long time.

KRIS GUTIÉRREZ: Well, I know that in working with our after school club, part of that requires students to really do hard intellectual work, to develop theories about language and culture before they go out into the field. When they are in the field, they try to develop some ethnography of their experience in the field, and we have a template for that. And we've really found that the whole ethnographic process and the ethnographic fieldnotes are really a tool for helping them make sense not only of the theory but also of their own relation in the field. Because we are often placing students in communities that are foreign to them. Students who don't have the understanding and appreciation of the communities in which they are doing this work. And we have found that using that fieldnote template becomes an occasion not only for recording that data but of making sense of what goes on in the field. So, we have really seen how this process has become a motivational, a part of student learning.

RAY MCDERMOTT: I have so many students here; I don't know what to say. I have never figured out how to teach a course on ethnography, but I have been trying. I try all the time. The only successful stuff that I have done is to teach courses on topics, like family or community education. So, teach a course on family and community education and teach a lot of methods so that people have to get out there and study families. The topic had to dominate the methodological device. I know that some people say that it doesn't have to be that way, some people that I really trust, but I can't do it that way. If I don't have a focus on a particular institution, I can't do it.

I do have a behavioral analysis class where we're not swinging so big as to talk about ethnography - we're talking about assuming you did a wonderful ethnography and you have some interesting audio and video tapes on the table, what are you going to do with them? That one, I think that I have figured out how to teach. At Stanford, it's only a ten week course. I very slowly learned that it can't be done with natural stuff, it can't be done, so we use plays. But using plays is kind of cheating on reality because so much of the stuff is already structured and you've already done most of your analysis before it even starts. You know, Act I, Act II, scenes, a list of the most important people in the front, and the world just doesn't come that beautifully packaged. And then all of the text is cleaned up and the 'ums' and 'uhs' and the sotto voce and whatever else, they are all missing.

So, for the most part, my students learn how to do ethnography on their own. The money that I have gotten over the years to do projects always comes with students from somewhere else. The ethnography students that we get always want to do their own thing - imagine that? And they go and do their own thing and I stand around and they bring me stuff and I complain or I say why don't you go and do this. It goes around, kind of like the curriculum materials that we have been trying to build for the last ten years in math. If the teacher walks into the group and says, "Oh, you're doing this, this, and this, and here is how you do it better," it's over. If the teacher walks into the group and says, "What are you doing?" and the kid says, "Well, we're doing this, this, and this," and the teacher says, "Tell me more," now something is going to happen, something is going to get learned. And I can't imagine that ethnography could be done in any other way.

NANCY HORNBERGER: Well, how about, I know that we want to give the audience a chance to ask questions, but how about finishing. Do you each want to ask each other a question?

KRIS GUTIÉRREZ: One thing that I feel like we share that I would love to hear Ray talk about more, is this very critical stance toward the enterprise of education, maybe for different and similar reasons. I think that might be important to talk about because I think that it is a big motivation for some of the things that we are doing.

RAY MCDERMOTT: Rhetoric wise, for the last thirty years, I have just been going increasingly toward the left. Emotionally, it's the same stuff. My sense of desperation grows. My sense of annoyance and impatience grows and so the rhetoric grows. The relationship between the rhetoric and getting things done for me, I think, is small, but for other people, I think it has a negative correlation. Herve Varenne, my most mainstream, in the middle of things friend, says absolutely the most radical things I've ever heard without any of the rhetoric of the left kind. If Herve was in charge of the world, we wouldn't need any rhetoric. That's a good rhetorical device that I will throw in for use. But, damn, things are bad.

My sense of the enemy has grown considerably but it has gotten increasingly internalized. The enemy is not - (Audience members are saying names like Bloomberg and Bush.) I can't bring myself to say his name.) it's not just him. It turns out to be me. It turns out to be that still thirty years together, I don't know how to teach a class for teacher educators that's going to put race and class front and center. That after thirty years of trying, we still misread our crowd. We misread everybody before hand. Every time I take five minutes off from the race problem, I always end up five steps back. And when I do get involved, I only gain three leaps, you know? So, it's really hard. And the class thing too. The last time I went back to my mother's house, the time she read the paper, I had a hard time being there. I went in with upper middle class California sensibilities, and I don't know where I am. This is the house that I grew up in. I looked around and I just can't figure out how these people live. The radical rhetoric is in some part a confession of my own struggles and severely dishonest I suspect, in ways that I am trying to work through and work on.

KRIS GUTIÉRREZ: I think that race and ethnicity and language in California, are even more simple to me now. The more and more students I get who tell me that they are tired of talking about race, it become both disheartening and extraordinarily frightening when we see in California and the history that it brings, both race and ethnicity so front and center in its policies. I think it needs to be put on the table and some of you may have seen Lani Guinier's new book *The Miner's Canary* and I think that the metaphor that she uses is such an important one. She talks about race is our canary, that like the miner's canary that was used to signal the miners to the poisonous gases in the tunnels, that race relations in our country is a measure of our humanity, a measure of the kind of civilization that we can have. I think that's a wonderful metaphor for thinking about the importance of race. It's always been important, but I think that it's especially important now to talk about race and ethnicity. In this recent paper that I sent to Ray, I struggle with it, because we know that these are social constructs but how we also have to use them to fight the inequities that exist. I know that in our own state, there is a proposition that may pass that will make it illegal to collect data about race and ethnicity and in a utopian setting that might make sense, but not in a setting where you need to collect this data to fight against a constant onslaught of discrimination and inequities. So, it's very difficult.

I think that since we are talking about ethnography, the issues of representation are critically important - how we talk with these communities. I just did a piece that was really a call to ask other progressive educators not to talk for us, but to talk with us, as you construct notions of what constitutes social justice. That social justice, I always say, has a real question - does social justice mean that I'm going to have lots of opportunities to be just like you? Or, does social justice mean that I'm going to have the chance to be who I want to be, which might include some things that look like you. So, I think representation, how we think about communities - my colleague Walter [unclear] says that we've got to move from thinking about communities as data plantations to really thinking about working with communities in profoundly different ways. For us, that means that we have tried to have a set of guiding principles that we work on with those communities so that we have some common understanding, some starting point. And I think that issue is central right now - how are we going to be with those communities. And we cannot ignore the violence that has been committed in the name of ethnographies in those communities.

NANCY HORNBERGER: I'd like to thank both of you for being here.

Kris Gutiérrez

Kris Gutiérrez is professor at the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at UCLA and the Director of the Education Studies minor. She is also the Director of the Center for the Study of Urban Literacies. Gutiérrez earned a PhD at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Her current research interests include a study of the sociocultural contexts of literacy development, particularly the study of the acquisition of academic literacy for language minority students. Her research also focuses on understanding the relationship between language, culture, development, and pedagogies of empowerment. She is a regular columnist for the Los Angeles Times, and has received many honors including the Outstanding Latina Faculty Award awarded by the American Association of Higher Education in 1999 and the Harriet and Charles Gluckman Distinguished Teaching Award at UCLA (1997).

Her publications are numerous; some recent publications include: "So what's new in the English Language Arts: Challenging policies and practices", *Language Arts Journal* (in press); "Hypermediating literacy activity: How learning contexts get reorganized", in O. Saracho & B. Spodek *Contemporary Perspectives in Early Childhood Education* (in press); "English for the children: The new literacy of the old world order", *Bilingual Review Journal* (2001); and "Teaching and learning in the 21st Century", *English Education*, (2001).

Ray McDermott

Ray McDermott has been a professor at Stanford University since 1989. He was an Elementary School Teacher in the New York City Public Schools prior to returning to graduate school and earning his Ph.D. in Anthropology at Stanford in 1977. His dissertation, *Kids Make Sense*, is still frequently cited. Prior to teaching at Stanford University, he was with Teachers College, Columbia University from 1979-1989. Dr. McDermott takes a broad interest in the analysis of human communication, the organization of school success and failure, and the history and use of various literacies around the world. His work includes studies of inner-city public schools, after-school computer clubs, middle-school mathematics reform classrooms, and the function of information technologies in different cultures. He was the 2001 winner of the Council on Anthropology in Education Spindler Award for anthropological research in education.

His publications include: "A century of Margaret Mead," *Teachers College Record* (in press); "Culture is not an environment of the mind," *Journal of the Learning Sciences* (1999); *Successful failure: The school America builds* (with Hervé Varenne, 1998); "When is Math or Science?," *Thinking Practices in Mathematics and Science Learning* (with Vicki Webber, 1998); and "Achieving school failure 1972-1997," *Education and Cultural Process* (1997).

[Report accessibility issues and request help](#)

Copyright 2025 The University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education's Online Urban Education Journal

Source **URL:**<https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu/archive/volume-1-issue-2-fall-2002/dialogue-across-time-space-and-perspective-saturday-evening-conve>