

The construction of understanding in a 6th grade bilingual classroom.

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Note to Readers: *It had previously been announced that the last issue of Volume 5 would feature responses to M.A.K. Halliday's article, "Towards a Language-Based Theory of Learning," which appeared on pages 93-116 of the Number 2 issue. Due to its length, the Special Issue planned for Number 3 had to become a combined issue. The Editors decided to include the responses to Halliday's article in the Volume 6, Number 1, 1994 issue (a preview of this issue is listed on the following page ii).*

The Construction of Understanding in a Sixth-Grade Bilingual Classroom

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In this article, teaching and studenting are conceived of as performances defined both institutionally and interactionally. Schools are viewed as providing an institutional framework and an organizational definition for teacher and student roles, whereas the actual roles experienced by teachers and students are viewed as interactionally constituted. From this perspective, each school and classroom is a particular kind of setting with particular opportunities for interacting and learning, even though schools and classrooms, as a general class of institutional entity, may share certain common organizational patterns.

I present an analysis of how members of a bilingual sixth-grade classroom construct knowledge as they interact within a particular event of a social science history project. This analysis shows how theory informs analysis, and conversely, how analysis informs theory. Data are presented to illustrate ways in which knowledge is constructed by members through interactions in a local event (i.e., the presentation and defense of their island history) and over time (a 2½-month period). Ways in which positions (institutional definitions) and positionings (interactionally constructed definitions) are established by bilingual and Spanish or English dominant students through their actions and interactions are discussed along with related issues of language use.

David Smith (1992), discussing the nature of schools as sites for learning, wrote:

The anthropologist . . . sees all schools as inexorable sites for learning. . . . What is being learned, or course, depends upon the nature of the relationship defined by the participants of the setting. . . . The anthropology of education has not only pioneered in documenting and explicating these processes by its attention to both the ideal and the real culture of schooling . . . , but it has also been able to demonstrate the primacy of the latter to an explanation of the phenomenon of schooling. (p. 191)

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