Crossing Borders with Language

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In this chapter we argue that the MayaWest Writing Summer Institute offered at the University of Puerto Rico in Mayagüez and the Proyecto Maestría program offered at the University of Texas in Austin provides professional development spaces where contested discourses on languages and literacies can safely and comfortably take place. In order to revision themselves and their classroom pedagogies, the teachers participating in both of these professional development projects planned to cross borders, including but not limited to linguistic, cultural, political, and technological borders. Teacher participation in these projects assumes teachers are serious about addressing inequalities in schooled literacy achievement. It also assumes teachers are willing to “try on” new forms of language use in order to learn about pedagogies that may better serve students whose repertoires put them at greater risk of failure to thrive within the larger society and dominant culture. The “trying on” of new ways of teaching was simply stated by a teacher during a “mock” demonstration of what occurred at the inaugural MayaWest Writing Project Summer Institute in 2008; “estamos aquí por ellos, los estudiantes/we are here for them, the students.”

In this chapter we highlight particular literacy events in the two professional development programs because these events provided varied transformative experiences for teachers. We index these two programs and events as cases that applaud teachers for seeking the additive characteristics of sociocultural competence (Moll & Arnot-Hopffer, 2005) to precipitate change in the way language and the language arts are taught to students becoming biliterate (Pérez, 2003) in Puerto Rico and in Texas.

According to Heath’s (1983) classic study, a literacy event refers to what people do with their language. She defines a literacy event as “any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes” (p. 93). She highlighted that these literacy events ought to be interpreted in relation to the larger sociopolitical patterns of society at large. Street (1984, 1988) employed the phrase “literacy practices” focusing upon everyday uses and meanings of literacy that participants bring to bear upon literacy events. Barton and Hamilton (2000) added that texts are central to literacy events. These texts arise from practices that, in many ways, are shaped by the very events in which they take place. Therefore, if literacy events are shaped by texts, and, literacy practices shape the literacy events themselves, then the organization of our chapter should capture how this recursive cycle worked for the teachers participating in the MayaWest Summer Writing Institute and Proyecto Maestría Program. Toward this end, we first present descriptions of the history, goals, and participants of both of these professional development opportunities as well as our relationship to these two programs. Next, we provide an overview of a third space transformative framework that highlights teachers navigating familiar and unfamiliar literacy practices within literacy events. Examples illustrate how teachers perceived shifts in their pedagogical stances as a result of the authoring practices provided and taken up by them in literacy events. Finally, we close with implications related to our work with teachers who choose to be, in the words of Aronowitz and Giroux (1985), transformative intellectuals.

Professional Development for Teachers of Bilingual Students

History of MayaWest Writing Project (MWWP) The goal of the MayaWest Writing Project is to provide teachers with professional development in the teaching of writing and literacy at all levels. It is based on the core values of many writing project sites of the National Writing Project (NWP). These values include the following premises: writing is critical to learning across all disciplines and grade levels; working as partners, universities and schools can improve student writing; teachers are the best teachers of teachers; when teachers are given time to write and reflect
on their writing, their teaching is enhanced. When these values are embodied the teachers reflect the additive personality documented by Moll and Arnot-Hopfier (2005) in Arizona. In their longitudinal study the teachers of a case study school built an environment that cultivates the development of biliteracy, establishes confianza (mutual trust) with colleagues and administrators, and becomes vigilant of their own political and ideological clarity (Bartolomé & Balderrama, 2001) related to the language rights and responsibilities of the children they teach.

What makes the NWP program different than other professional writing approaches is the fact that teachers teach teachers in order to take on responsibilities as skilled consultants/coaches who serve as mentors for best practices in literacy instruction in their regions. Initially, the teacher leaders in-the-making, participate in an intensive 4-week summer institute and immerse themselves in reading, writing, and demonstrating to each other literacy lessons that have been successful with their students. Writing in several genres is a central literacy practice to the institute and teachers, themselves, go through the process of composing and revising their own writing and then searching out publishing possibilities. The unique characteristic of the MayaWest Writing Project is that the teaching, learning, demonstrating, and publishing are accomplished through two languages, Spanish and English.

When the project began in 2008, there was one NWP site in Puerto Rico on the campus of Sagrado Corazón, a private university. It is named the Borinquen Writing Project and serves the San Juan metropolitan area and the eastern part of the Island. The MayaWest Writing Project serves school districts from Ponce on the southwest side of the Island and as far as Arecibo on the northwest side of the Island. While the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez is primarily a polytechnic university offering degrees in engineering, sciences, agriculture, and business it also houses an English department. The university does not have a college of Education. Instead, the English and Spanish departments work in conjunction with the Continuing Education program to prepare its K–16 teachers. Unlike other universities, a Bilingual Writing Center offers trained tutors to assist students requiring English as a second language (ESL) and writing services, and they offer presentations available to all interested members of the campus community.

Puerto Rico has a unique language context that contributes to a public school that is plagued with many challenges. Since 1898 when Puerto Rico was ceded by Spain to the United States, the status of Spanish and English has varied. In 1917 when Puerto Ricans were made U.S. citizens, the majority of residents were monolingual Spanish-speaking; by 1952, when the Island became an associated Commonwealth, most residents had studied English as a subject in school. The 2000 census reported 3,800,000 Puerto Ricans living on the Island and almost as many living stateside with the largest concentrations living in the urban areas of New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Illinois. Educators on the Island estimate that more than 50% of the Puerto Rican population is abroad at any one time, and the constant state of seasonal movement or circulatory migration between the Island and the mainland has had an impact on language teaching and literacy learning (Tucker, 2005). According to Nieto (2000), “For many Puerto Ricans migration has tended to be a series of periodic movements to and from the Island. Consequently, what Puerto Ricans as a group expect of U.S. schools is not assimilation, but rather accommodation to and even the protection and maintenance of their language and culture” (p. 11). However, the educators associated with the MayaWest writing project in 2008 lamented the impact of current educational policies on what students know and don’t know about their Puerto Rican culture, history, and traditions.

For the inaugural MayaWest Writing Project, 18 teachers were selected for the intensive summer institute of 2008. This first group of teachers set the foundation for future projects and became the founding teacher consultants. They represented private and public schools, grades K–16 and taught in English, Spanish, or bilingual classrooms. For the second year, another 18 teachers were selected and 4 teacher consultants from the inaugural group joined in the directorship of the summer institute of 2009. Ellen Pratt is a professor of English and was acting Director for both summer institutes. María Fránquiz is a professor of Bilingual-Bicultural Education and provided support during the application process for MWWP in 2007 and visited on-site during the latter week of the summer institutes of 2008 and 2009. María became a teacher consultant of the SouthCoast Writing Project (SCWriP) at the University of California at Santa Barbara in the summer of 1993. She was born in Puerto Rico but has not been a full time resident of the Island since her third year of schooling. Ellen was born stateside but has been a full time resident of the island for over three decades.

History of Proyecto Maestría Proyecto Maestría Collaborative for Teacher Leadership in Bilingual and ESL Education is the product of a grant from the U.S. Dept of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition. Proyecto Maestría provides scholarship money for current, certified bilingual teachers with 5 years experience from the local Central Texas area to pursue a Masters degree in Curriculum and Instruction with specialization in bilingual education. Its purpose is to improve the quality and increase the quantity of highly skilled bilingual and ESL teachers in the metropolitan area, promote teacher retention, and improve the educational outcome for the region’s growing population of English Language Learners (ELLs). Because the majority ELL enrollment is of Mexican heritage, the teachers selected to participate in the program teach in elementary school Spanish/English bilingual classrooms.

The 2008 Proyecto Maestria cohort was comprised of nine teachers and the 2009 cohort was comprised of twelve teachers. The majority of teachers in each cohort are of Mexican origin and some have deep generational ties to when Texas was part of Mexico. During two summers,
the exemplary bilingual teachers selected to participate in Proyecto Maestría attend university classes full-time; during the 9 months of the academic calendar year they are enrolled in classes part-time. Upon completion of the Masters program, the graduates serve as mentor teachers on their campuses and provide leadership related to bilingual and ESL education to their districts.

Professors Pratt and Fránquiz agreed to have the teachers participating in the MayaWest Writing Summer Institute and the teachers participating in session I of Proyecto Maestría (a four course intensive summer session) to meet via videoconferencing. The purpose of the videoconference was to learn about literacy events and practices and what they mean to language teachers in bilingual educational settings of various schools in Puerto Rico and in Central Texas. The meeting was expected to become an articulation of teacher identity, or what Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) call identity in practice. The connections across the two groups of teachers provided “one way of naming the dense interconnections” of personhood, not as “independent from but webbed within historical social worlds” (p. 270). When the teachers met via digital technologies they were immersed in their second week of their summer professional development projects. They were reading and writing in Spanish, English, or bilingually and making sense of social, cultural, historical, political, and economic practices of which they were a part.

Transformative Framework for Teacher Development

Studies that acknowledge, enhance, and develop the existing strengths, or funds of knowledge, of teachers are few. Chicana feminist thought is helpful in the study of bilingual educators because these perspectives promote a focus on bilingualism, biculturalism, and coalition building. This frame can also be influenced by teacher experiences with dual languages and border crossings.

To use border theory and third space Chicana feminist theories of identity, the work of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) is critical. She explored how the structures of culture can both bind and deter bonding with the group. In her seminal work, Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza, Anzaldúa, as a lesbian, identified the structures that forced her to resist the group culture of homophobia (pp. 41–42). At the same time, she claimed that the music and corridos (pp. 82–83) and many other cultural expressions helped her form an allegiance to and a loyalty to that cultural group. Thus, she suggested the metaphor of a bridge across differences and situated the process as movement inside the in-between border spaces and liminal places—nepantla (the Aztec concept for the third space). While Anzaldua’s ideas are grounded in her South Texas lived reality, they transcend across borders and address issues found in the greater sociocultural world. For this reason we found it pertinent to our work with teachers who were predominantly of Mexican or Puerto Rican origin because the linguistic resources students bring into classroom literacy events can be effectively used as material resources for communicating, making meaning and constructing one’s identity as a bilingual person (Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004).

Videoconferencing as a Third Space for Teacher Professional Development

A visual representation of what happened when we brought the bilingual language teachers from the two professional groups together into a dialogical space is shown in Figure 5.1. The videoconference between MayaWest Writing Project teachers and Proyecto Maestría teachers served as a meditational tool to promote a zone of expanded learning (Bhabha, 1994; Gutierrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda, 1999; Soja, 1996) through dialogue. Although the visual representation in Figure 5.1 does not reflect the dynamics of movement in a third dimensional space, it does provide an idea of the third space for transformation in the videoconference literacy event.

Some of the themes that emerged in the space of videoconferencing were: teachers overcoming the fear of writing, a common worry about standardized writing measures for their students, concerns about stronger family involvement practices, needing more pedagogy for including children with special needs, addressing resistant language learners, manteniendo corazones abiertos a nuevas ideas/maintaining hearts open to new ideas, painting pictures of possibilities, among other themes.

Transcripts of each videoconference and teachers’ subsequent written reflections of the literacy event were used to cull these themes. Transcripts indicate that during 2008 the teachers used more English and in 2009 they used more Spanish in their dialogue. One of the Proyecto Maestría teachers wrote in her reflection, “I feel this was my very first step of becoming a teacher of teachers” which is actually a primary goal of the MayaWest Writing Project. Another Proyecto Maestría teacher raised an important question in her written reflection of the videoconference literacy event.
The comment that surprised me the most was that teachers felt that in Puerto Rico the public schools are failing to prepare students in academic English sufficient to be successful with the primary language of texts at the University or College level. They expressed how public and private schools are attracting new students by providing English as the primary language of instruction. This issue is similar to the challenges of the bilingual programs in public schools throughout the United States. The question in both cases is: Are we providing equitable and adequate education for our second language learners to meet the challenges of higher education?

Interestingly, a teacher from the MayaWest Project expressed this same new consciousness when she wrote in her journal:

Learning about the struggles other teachers have in their classrooms regarding writing skills in a multilingual setting provided us with a clear understanding of what teachers go through. The tendency in Puerto Rico is to live inside a bubble, perhaps a characteristic many islanders feel at times. The opportunity to share “live” with teachers beyond our land is just an example of how far we can go with technology. At the end, teachers have the same passion, interests, and motivations, and through these resources, we are truly blessed to share strategies and successful stories that enrich us all, rompiendo las barreras de la distancia, uniéndonos a traves de un fin común, una educación dinámica de cambios y transformación social [breaking distance barriers, uniting together toward a common goal, a dynamic education for change and social transformation].

Another digital technology that provided a “third space” for teachers occurred within the MayaWest Writing Project itself. Teachers tested out and expanded their changing beliefs about languages and literacies by posting their writing on the E-Anthology, a space maintained by NWP. In this space there were no directors or leaders monitoring what people wrote. In the absence of hierarchy there were four locations for contributions: Guestbook, Classroom Matters, A Day in the Life, and Open Mike. At first, English was recognized as the language of communication on the E-Anthology so initially the Puerto Rican teachers introduced themselves in English, including the Spanish teachers among them. Slowly they began to introduce Spanish words and phrases in their writing; then entire pieces written in Spanish were posted on the E-Anthology. By the end of the institute, eloquent pieces incorporated both languages as expressions of their dual language identities. Interestingly, their audience was overwhelmingly monolingual English speaking. The crossing of borders on the E-Anthology raised all sorts of issues related to past training and experiences. For example, for some teachers their first contacts with code switching had been negative. Also, their pedagogical training viewed the teaching of English as separate from the teaching of Spanish. Additionally, Spanish teachers were blamed for not teaching writing and English teachers were blamed for placing too much emphasis on English. Contentions ended with a call for a hybridized curriculum (Gutierrez et al., 1999). We wondered if the changed attitudes were a result of the audience on the online forum provided by the E-Anthology; the audience had been accepting of the Spanish postings. For example, one bilingual teacher stateside wrote:

Gracias por presentar un día típico. He aprendido mucho de ustedes este verano. Son un grupo dinámico. Me encantó la última línea que dice, “El escribir se ha convertido en vicio, pero si este vicio es gratificante, seguiremos con este vicio.” Seguramente este es un vicio muy bueno.

Thank you for describing a typical day. I have learned much from you this summer. You are a dynamic group. I loved the last line that stated, “Writing has turned into a vice, but if this vice is so gratifying, on with it!” Surely this is a good vice to have.

It was the third space of Web-based technology that had created a supportive environment for the development of biliteracy, confianza, and ideological clarity regarding the use of all linguistic resources, including code switching, for writing. Clearly, a more critical understanding of the role of language in the construction of their own and students’ identities and an awareness of how linguistic ideology can serve to maintain rigid borders contributed to the sociocultural competence of teachers participating in the MayaWest Writing Project Summer Institute. Researchers such as Hornberger (1989, 2000) published a comprehensive review of the literature on biliteracy development because she asserts that the most productive settings for developing biliteracy exemplify a balance between attention to receptive and productive skills, between oral and written languages, and between the use of native language and second language. What isn’t totally clear in this research is the plurality of texts associated with multimedia technologies (New London Group, 1996) and the semiotic toolkit (Dyson, 2001; Jewitt & Kress, 2003) needed to access the literacy practices of the contemporary social landscape (Luke, 2000). For example, when one of the Proyecto Maestría teachers commented on the resources available in her district for students’ composing of multimodal texts the scarcity of material resources in Puerto Rico became evident. Nonetheless, Reyes (2001) states that teachers should “unleash students’ potential by creating classrooms where English and Spanish are promoted, modeled, valued, nurtured, legitimized and utilized” (p.119) even if the shift from page to screen is limited. Nevertheless, the experience the teachers had using technology to communicate across borders in two languages awakened them to the possibilities for how they could use technology in their classrooms. After the 2009 Summer Institute, a writing project teacher found a classroom stateside that her students could communicate with through the Internet and Skype. She recognized her experience in the summer as the motivating force for this endeavor.

Cultivating authors in MayaWest Writing Project and in Proyecto Maestría By achieving a measure of ideological clarity regarding crossing linguistic borderlands
the MayaWest Writing Project Summer Institute teachers were provided opportunities to experience the unleashing of their own potential as writers of two languages. Besides the videoconference there were regular events nurtured through literacy practices that became ordinary to participants. Many of these literacy practices are promoted by NWP across their 200+ sites and are also writing process routines in many K–16 classrooms. In that sense they are literate practices not invented by the practitioners of the local context (Brandt & Collins, 2002) except for a hybridization of language use. The literate practices included scribe for the day, author’s chair, book talk, I-search (replaced Research Paper of Summer 2008), Demonstration, Writing to a Prompt or Quote, Memoirs, and other Freewriting activities. When one of the teachers from Proyecto Maestría asked the Puerto Rican teachers participating in summer 2009, ¿Cuál es su favorita parte del día?/What is your favorite part of the day? a teacher from the MayaWest Summer Writing Institute answered, “El día...la parte favorita del día es cuando se lee el ¨scribe¨. Nosotros narramos lo que sucedió y así podemos ver lo que hemos completado durante todo el día. Esa es la parte favorita del día mío./The day...the favorite part of the day is when the scribe reads. We narrate what happened and that way we can know what we have completed during the whole day. That’s my favorite part of the day.” Another teacher answered, “Disfruto mucho el momento en que vamos a la silla del autor ya que entiendo...que todos dejamos expresar nuestra emoción, nuestro sentimiento, y a veces entre risas y lagrimas disfrutamos todos el día./I enjoy the moment of the author’s chair now that I understand...that we all express our emotion, our feeling, and at times between laughs and tears we enjoy the day together.”

The literate practice of a scribe sharing ethnographic notes regarding the accomplishments of the previous day in the writing project took many different and creative forms—one day a poem, one day a narrative, one day a recipe, one day a song, and much more. Another literate practice, Author’s Chair, requires active listening to the author who is sharing; this event is designed to help teachers and students better understand literacy processes. In the case of the scribe, Mercado and Moll (2000) discuss the transformative powers middle school children in New York experienced linguistically, relationally, and academically while documenting life in their local Puerto Rican community. Writing about the life around them was empowering. Equally satisfying is sharing writing with those who belong to the local community. With the Author’s Chair writers assume the various roles of reader, writer, listener, and critic/editor (Graves & Hansen, 1983; Graves, 1983). Author’s Chair grows out of writing process pedagogy and authors use this public occasion as a means to receive affirmative feedback and/or for revising. In these interactive literacy practices group members share writing with each other through high levels of participation. For teachers in the project, the experience of sharing what they had written during the day also allowed them to hear their own voices, thus providing a sense of self-affirmation and empowerment through their writing.

For the Proyecto Maestría teachers, classrooms were set up as safe dialogic spaces for the co-construction of a community that discloses, reflects, conceptualizes, and transforms former monocultural ways of being. As such, they are encouraged to use the language and language varieties from home and community in the learning process. Since many of the teachers have grown up along the U.S./Mexico border with many internalized majoritarian tales (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993; Chapman, 2007) such as, “Speak Spanish at home and English at school” or “Speak Spanish correctly, and cut out that Tex Mex language,” the invitation to express thoughts through all available linguistic resources is often liberating. The writing project was also set up to provide similar spaces for their teachers, and the use of English and Spanish and Spanglish alternated throughout the day with bilingual teachers code switching often. Given the tumultuous history of the island and the United States, language is closely tied to issues of Puerto Rican identity (Zentella, 1997), and the project provided the desirable space to share language identities in English and Spanish through their writing.

In order to provide opportunities for Proyecto Maestría teachers to author their autobiographies, Fránquiz presents an assignment the first day of class that is an exercise to “trigger both negative and positive memories” (Tello, 1994, p. 59) of past language and literacy experiences. The act of eliciting memorias/memories about oppressive moments in personal and collective educational histories serves at least two purposes: (a) becoming conscious of one’s cultural and linguistic oppression makes visible the impact of majoritarian tales such as “Forget your native language and culture, and become part of the great American melting pot” and, (b) raises questions such as, “Does the American dream have to be dreamt in English-only?” This assignment is intended to deconstruct tales of a single path to Americanization and also begins the journey toward liberatory pathways so that the teachers are not left behind in sync with the totalizing effects of majoritarian tales.

Memorias were elicited from all the Proyecto Maestría teachers of summers 2008 and 2009. The assignment was simply called “My Literacy Journey Box.” In the research literature a journey box is “literally a box (e.g., suitcase, trunk, chest, cardboard container) that contains a themed set of photographs, selected artifacts, texts, journal entries, and an index that together tell a first-hand story of time and place” (Labbo & Field, 1999, p. 177). It is a typical way to understand the use of primary documents in the field of social studies. For example, to construct the life of a heroine, a president, or a civil rights leader. In the journey box project, the heroine or hero is the teacher and the memoria is the story of her/his subordinated knowledge first represented in the journey box, then in a timeline, and finally in an autobiography. This assignment requires a few more modalities than a typical memoir, and the teachers typically share the contents of their journey box in English, Spanish,
or bilingually with the whole class whereas the autobiogra-
phy is shared in a dyad. Following is the influence this
assignment had on one of the Proyecto Maestría teachers.

The teacher whom I will call Liliana was born in South
Texas at the SunTex Farms ranch right outside of Rio Grande
City, Texas. She is first generation U.S. born of migrant farm
workers. In summer of 2008, during her initial summer in
Proyecto Maestría, Liliana wrote in her autobiography:

When I was introduced to researching in my science and
social studies classes I came to the realization that I loved to
write about facts. Reading history books and writing reports
about my learning became a favorite past time of mine. This
type of writing together with my poetry writing and letter
writing really gave me an outlet to express the thoughts, feel-
ings, emotions and learning that I was experiencing at school
and at home. Writing provided me with the consciousness of
thinking about my thinking and putting it on paper. I guess
in my literary life the one thing I always tried to find was
my own voice. In the chaos of child poverty and migrant
working, it became very important. It was an outlet away
from the realities of life and a place to contemplate on what
life should become for me in the future.

The search for her writer’s voice both in disciplinary and
social writing provided Liliana with the tools necessary to
deal with the mobility that was ordinary to her bilingual
migrant family and Mexican-American community. She
was acutely aware of the benefits of the funds of knowledge
(Vélez-Ibarra & Greenberg, 1992; Moll, Amanti, Neff, &
González, 1992) at home as can be seen by another passage
in her auto-narrative.

Today, I am bilingual because of the fact my environment
provided me with an enriched life filled with bilingualism
and biculturalism that I wouldn’t have otherwise. If it had
been up to my educational system they would have stripped
me of it all. I find myself today as a teacher struggling with
the fact that my students could experience this stripping
away of their language and culture. The only thing I pray
for is that I give them some tools to defend themselves and
to protect themselves from it all.

Liliana’s writing illustrates deep critical reflection re-
garding her own education whereby maintenance of her
Spanish heritage language had typically been seen as a
problem to be expunged from her and other Mexican heri-
tage students. Instead, Liliana knew that her bilingualism
should have been seen as a resource for her learning (Frán-
quiz & Reyes, 1998) or acknowledged as her fundamental
human right (Ruiz, 1984). The desire to equip her students
with the same bilingual and bicultural tools that had been
passed to her by family and community was evident across
the weeks that she participated in the foundational courses
of Proyecto Maestría.

Conclusion

The collaborative study described in this chapter encom-
passes our ethnographic musings through which we imagine
new possibilities for teachers and their students. We em-
phasize the resource that hybridity in multimodal literacy
events offer and the literate practices that sustain life in
linguistically diverse classrooms. The teachers in Puerto
Rico and Central Texas shared common concerns and took
risks as users of language in order to develop characteristics
of sociocultural competence.

Because little is known about the preparation of teach-
ers of color generally (Elenes, González, Delgado Bernal,
& Villenas, 2001; Sheets, 2004) and bilingual education
teachers in particular (Arce, 2004; Clark & Flores, 2001),
the two projects reported in this chapter heed the call of
Darling-Hammond, French, and Garcia-Lopez (2002) and
Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden (2005) who argue
that teacher education must assist all teachers in acquiring
the necessary knowledge and skills to teach language and
literacy for social justice. As the effort of a collaborative
team of university teacher educators, we offered important
insights based on the privilege we share in working with
educators from K–16, many who are teachers of color seek-
ning guidance in understanding and responding to learner
diversity in ways appropriate to local contexts. It is fitting
to close with the words of one of the teachers who experi-
enced a transformation during her professional development
opportunity at the MayaWest Writing Summer Institute.
In her own words she describes a new found language
of solidarity with the other teachers.

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