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Kuwento as Multicultural Pedagogy in High School Ethnic Studies

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In this ethnographic study, situated in a high school's Filipino Heritage Studies in northern California, the author conceptualises *kuwento* (story) as a cultural and sociolinguistic practice assisting the learning of curricular material and defining participants' membership in class. Explicit in *kuwento* are discussions about ethnicity and culture that offer insight into relevant pedagogical strategies in multicultural classrooms. The author sheds light on the very construction of *kuwento* as part of larger discourses about Filipina/o American history. Included are uses of *kuwento* during a unit on post-Spanish-American War.

According to the United States Census in 2000, demographic shifts indicate that minority populations have become the majority in certain states. In California, Pacific Islanders and Asian Americans (11.5%), American Indians (1%), African Americans (7%), and Latina/os (32%) make up over 51% of the population. Among Asian American groups, Filipinos are second to Chinese in number and have founded communities in the Central Valley as well as in the metropolitan areas, mainly San Diego, Los Angeles, and the San Francisco Bay Area. Although they and other ethnic minorities contribute to greater diversity in society, Filipinos' increasing population also raises many issues and challenges related to building institutions, accessing resources, and forging a sense of inter- and intragroup identity (Bonus, 2000; Cordova, 1998; Espiritu-Halagao, 2004; Litton, 1999; Strobel, 2001). Particularly in our schools, these challenges go beyond cultural sensitivity and understanding; they form the basis and logic behind multicultural teaching and learning. To address them would mean to shift away from the myth of model minority and assimilation theory among Asian Americans and to offer

more than simplistic explanations for Filipinos' invisibility in the socioeconomic, cultural, and political fabric of American society (Chan, 1991; Lee, 1996). It would mean to unmask complex group experiences that had been overshadowed by stereotypes and reductive notions of diversity (Chang & Au, 2007/2008). It would mean to pry open the hidden curriculum, to question existing pedagogy, and to take a critical stance against (the perpetuation of) hegemonic forces in present-day classrooms. The latter would even include naming Filipina/os' colonial subjectivity as part of a heterogeneous American history and, for some more than others, creating and building a culture of empowerment. In this article, *kuwento* (or story) takes the centre stage as a lens into multicultural teaching and learning in the context of high school ethnic studies.

In an ethnographic study situated inside an accredited social studies course called Filipino Heritage Studies, I examine the social interactions between the students and their teacher, Mr. Q, one of the leading proponents of high school ethnic studies, through the use of *kuwento* as a cultural and sociolinguistic practice. I use *kuwento* to demonstrate how this particular practice assists in the learning of curricular material while defining participants' membership in class. Explicit discussions about ethnicity and culture offer insight into pedagogical strategies and identity-related practices relevant to Filipina/o American students. These discussions shed light on the very construction of *kuwento* as specific to the role(s) teachers and students play in shaping what, how, and why certain stories are told. For members of Filipino Heritage Studies, *kuwentos* shape not only their interactions in class but also their negotiations with larger discourses about Filipina/o American history. The following focuses on this aspect of *kuwento* during a unit on post-Spanish-American War.

WHAT IS KUWENTO?: DEFINITION AND FRAMEWORK

The word *kuwento* in Tagalog is derived from *cuento* in Spanish, meaning "story." Its spelling reflects the presence of consonants (*k* and *w*) to take the place of the letter *c* and create similar "ue" vowel sounds in the Philippine alphabet, respectively. Over 300 years under Spanish rule resulted in the amalgamation of people, cultures, and languages. The latter is of interest here as *kuwento*, a communicative tool drawn from Philippine folk and oral traditions, which continues to be a cultural and sociolinguistic practice among Filipina/o Americans. The concept of *kuwento* is best described both as a noun (story) and a verb (telling/listening to/participating in a story). To be clear, *kuwento* is not simply about sharing stories but also about the nature in which the stories take place. To understand *kuwento* is to first understand story.

A story is an abstraction of history—that is, one that transforms experience into a chronological sequence of events. It is an "account" consisting either of the past, present, or future and is based on temporal events that are of key importance

to individuals who choose to tell them (Bloome, Champion, Katz, Morton, & Muldrow, 2001). Variations in the construction of a story abound as each teller has her/his own individual experience, an experience that is co-constructed by many experiences. In other words, a story is produced, reproduced, and recycled as a consequence of social interactions.

Many Filipinos retain a rich oral tradition transmitting significant human experience (Eugenio, 1981). *Kuwento* (story) or *kuwento-kuwentohan* (the act of sharing story) becomes a part of the everyday life for children, youth, and adults. Abundant in folk literature, it is a tool for communicating experiences with family and community (Eugenio, 1981). It is neither gossip nor rumor; rather, it is based on (aspects of) actual events retold and reconstructed in the presence of others. Being creative in relating the story may result in the exaggeration of the actual story, but the basis of *kuwento* holds some truth. Passed on from one generation to the next, *kuwentos* find their way into the lives of those who hear and live through them. From a Bakhtinian perspective, we learn from others and, in the process of interaction, also learn to incorporate others' words or voices into our own. Borrowed and reconciled stories shape, if not make up, the ones we tell with our own voice(s) and intentions (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986). It is in this kind of manipulation or "owning" of such words that personal stories are born. Stories also expand to incorporate the multiplicity of voices surrounding the teller (Goodwin, 1990). Children, for example, are exposed to stories told by their parents, grandparents, and other kin. In some communities, "talk story" serves as a discursive cultural practice where turn-taking or mutual participation is integral (Au & Jordan, 1981). Stories amuse, stimulate imaginations, and teach individuals about themselves. They reflect one's inner thoughts, feelings, beliefs, aspirations, values, goals, expectations, and creativity. In short, they represent a construction of reality (Bruner, 1991). As individuals come to understand their experiences in the world, stories shape how they see themselves as well as the identities they take on (Baquedano-López, 1997; Ochs & Capps, 1996; Ochs, Taylor, Rudolph, & Smith, 1992).

Central to stories are the social events in which they are constructed. Stories are simply not the result of what the speaker has produced but also the result of a sort of co-authorship between the speaker and listener (Ochs, 1997). In a classroom context, the co-construction of story is mediated by the interactions with classmates and the teacher. "Footings" or roles such as introducer(s), primary recipient(s), problematizer(s), and evaluator(s) mold the story being told (Goffman, 1981). Whether in oral, visual, spatial, or written form, story creates an imagined space to voice out relevant tales and to make meaning of present-day events largely shaped by a historical past. Through the telling of stories, both the teacher and students in a classroom, for example, can learn about each other's diverse experiences to understand the sociocultural world in which they live. Story opens up avenues for building social relationships with the larger school community and places value on encounters with the outside world.

While conceptualising stories for use in the classroom, Michaels (1981) and Cazden (1994) assert that during sharing time, stories provide teachers and students official time to speak about out-of-school experiences. Sharing offers unlimited possibilities and encourages the active construction of newer understandings. Students are free “from the dreariness of fact-driven curriculums, find power in re-thinking and re-formulating ideas,” and have the opportunity to realise the complexity of the world “in which multiple perspectives exist” (Brooks & Brooks, 1993, p. 22). The classroom becomes more than a traditional place of learning; it becomes an unbounded space for elevating students’ potential beyond the norm and for accommodating their diverse stories. In the case of paucity in classroom material, the teacher can also engage students to learn through their own writing (Vascellaro & Genishi, 1994) and their own construction of oral stories. As we shall see, the teacher and students of Filipino Heritage Studies used multiple stories to convey present-day realities that in large part pattern the very subject they are studying. *Kuwento* functioned as a pedagogical tool to construct as well as challenge existing forms (or lack) of knowledge about Filipina/o American history in the classroom.

KUWENTO AS PEDAGOGY

Phillips (1972) refers to several structural arrangements of classroom interactions as participant structures.¹ In her view, teachers use participant structures as “ways of arranging verbal interaction with students, for communicating different types of educational material, and for providing variation in the presentation of the same material to hold children’s interest” (p. 377). Stories within these structures differ depending on the material being covered and the structure in which they are presented. For example, students in small groups use their stories to bond with each other, coating their stories with humor to entertain, testing their relationships within the storytelling and listening group, and comparing themselves and their situations with those of others (Heath, 1983). Different classroom situations allow for these efforts to happen and, eventually, intimate relationships develop between teachers and students in the production of stories.

In addition to social relationships, stories also establish cultural continuity in the classroom for they legitimise students’ sense of knowing. On the one hand, they are a major source of knowledge (Nieto, 1998, 2000); on the other, they serve as a means for students to communicate who they are and represent experiences relevant to them. When students’ stories are valued, so is their sense of self. Bridging school knowledge and one’s own cultural knowledge encourages students to take charge of their circumstances (Sleeter & Grant, 1991). This crucial connection between different sets of knowledge is a form of empowerment, one that situates learning and provides a space for critical thinking and dialogue

in the classroom (Banks, 1991; Freire, 1970; Shor, 1992). Additionally, stories become central to providing alternative narratives to dominant discourses, in particular through counterstorytelling that recognises a collective history of marginalisation based on race and other markers of difference (Solórzano & Yosso, 2000; Tate, 1997). Stories are key to conceptualising *kuwento* as more than a told tale shared among participants; they (re)shape and contribute to larger discourses relevant to multicultural and antiracist education.

For Mr. Q and the students in Filipino Heritage Studies, *kuwento* becomes a socially situated and co-constructed activity that adds meaning to their membership in class. The reason for telling a story and the function it serves help to explain the kinds of teaching and learning that occur through certain types of participant structures (i.e., from individual to small and large groups). Within a multicultural education framework, *kuwento* adheres to the dimensions of equity pedagogy, knowledge construction, and content integration while also promoting an empowering school culture that affirms the pluralism of students and their communities (Banks & Banks, 1997). It is a part of ongoing attempts to move away from “salad bowl” approaches that reduce multiculturalism to “foods and festivals.” *Kuwento* creates opportunities for multiple discourses that bind and complicate participants’ lived experiences. At times, such negotiated social meanings may give rise to tensions and contradictions that signal uneven power relations or ruptures in the hidden curriculum (Ellsworth, 1989; Luke & Gore, 1992; Nieto, 2002). In the following discussion, I illustrate power at play within Filipino Heritage Studies and how discontinuities in this value-laden space unfold through *kuwento*. The potential for empowerment in multicultural education becomes achievable by recognising an array of voices and having critical spaces for addressing different microcultures. It is in these rich-in-possibility spaces that *kuwento* is negotiated as formal knowledge and thus becomes relevant to teaching and learning.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data for examining *kuwento* is drawn from audio recordings of classes, participant observations, interviews, and informal conversations with Mr. Q and his students in Filipino Heritage Studies at Donovan High.² Data include field notes from observing classes 3 days a week over a span of 20 weeks and a collection of official records and documents about the school. Additional interviews with the school administrators and counsellors provided relevant historical background information. The Filipino Heritage Studies class as described here consisted of 32 students, 5 of whom served as focal students (2 are represented, namely, 11th grader Arlene and 12th grader Gerry). The teacher, Mr. Q, is a multilingual Tagalog-Waray-English speaker who was a key figure in implementing ethnic

studies at Donovan. My entry into Filipino Heritage Studies was with ease as Mr. Q and the students treated me as if I were a member of the class. I was able to connect with many of the students right away through personal conversations and activities, both inside and outside of the classroom. This “insider” position in the field allowed for emic perspectives related to *kuwento*.

To analyse several sources of data, I used discourse and content analysis. Emerging patterns in the uses of *kuwento* were identified, affirmed, and jointly interpreted by the participants in the study. *Kuwento* served as a unit of analysis during whole- and small-group classroom events such as lectures and discussions as well as individual activities such as reading and writing. With particular attention paid to its uses in the classroom, *kuwento* is broadly treated as (a) monologic and dialogic; (b) occurring in the past, present, and future; (c) brief and at length; and (d) oral and nonoral in form. *Kuwento* in Filipino Heritage Studies was shared within different types of participant structures. Within each of these structures, I characterised the manifestations of *kuwento* based on the following:

1. *Empathy*—seeing through and understanding someone else’s point of view,
2. *Entertainment*—inciting humour and laughter for self or for/with others, and
3. *Empowerment*—affirming and learning about one’s self; being able to make connections between one’s identity and social reality.

All three categories emerged as major characteristics of *kuwento* and key to the teaching and learning that took place in Filipino Heritage Studies. For the purpose of this article, I provide segments of Mr. Q’s and the students’ uses of *kuwento* to represent empathy and empowerment in whole- and small-group participant structures. I highlight in the data analysis the centrality of family, language, and diaspora in the study of Filipina/o American history as well as the construction of a Filipina/o American identity.³

BRIDGING CULTURES THROUGH *KUWENTO*

Kuwento surfaced in Filipino Heritage Studies in a variety of instances. Following are examples of *kuwento* used in bridging cultures in the study of the Filipina/o American history, mainly represented here as (a) dialogic (between teacher and students or among students themselves), (b) occurring in the past and present (subject matter spanning a historical continuum), (c) brief (speakers taking turns), and (d) oral (versus written or visual) in form. After an interactive lecture on the Spanish-American War, the class transitioned into a related topic as prompted by the question, “What do we know about the Philippines post-1900?” Mr. Q asked students to pair up, draw upon each other’s prior knowledge, and enlist lessons

learned from families and community members about this topic. The exercise required students to “give one, get one, and go on.” Approximately 10 minutes after the start, students returned to their respective seats and began to contribute to the class “bowl.” What follows is an excerpt that illustrates the interaction between Mr. Q and several of the students during the sharing session:

Mr. Q: ((enthusiastic)) OK, Steve, give us one.

Steve: Importance of family.

Mr. Q: Yeah, family. Where did you get that? We need an explanation.

Steve: Jason.

Mr. Q: Jason?

Jason: Family is more important in one’s life.

Mr. Q: Yeah, family more important, huh? Can you explain that, Jason.

Jason: Americans do their own, with not much value on other family members. Like Filipinos.

Mr. Q: There’s the key word. *Extended* family. We value extended family as much as we do the nuclear family. But over here, it’s just the nuclear family. Right? Second cousin, third cousin, no more. Sometimes, even first cousin too.

Students: ((laughing))

Nori: You know, like how you have cousins that you’re not even blood related to and that you’ve known since like you’re five.

Karen: [interjecting] They babysit you too. Like my grandma. And also friends. Like my mom’s friends who she went to college with. They’re all aunts to their kids. AUNTIES. Yeah, yeah.

Mr. Q: Even the friends of your parents, close friends, become your relatives too. Yeah, so it’s not just the extended family, not just your blood. Close friends become your family too.

It is evident from this whole-group *kuwento* that speakers believe there is little difference between blood and fictive kinship. Mr. Q acted as a facilitator (footing) while the students voiced out their take on the meaning of family. Significant here is the use of *kuwento* for teaching and learning that acknowledge students’ insights and identities to give direction to their potential growth. The emphasis is placed on family as a cultural tradition regardless of sanctioned boundaries. Interestingly, in this brief exchange, one student named Arlene realised the complexity of her own knowledge about family and posed a challenge to the terms “Filipino” and “American” as raised initially by Jason. The dichotomy of place, that is, the difference between “here” (United States) and there (Philippines), seems to be more blurred than what is suggested by Jason’s statement. Arlene directed her question to Mr. Q and subsequently inserted another *kuwento* gathered from the previous activity to make her point. Her partner, Joan, then reciprocated the *kuwento*. Together, in their telling and sharing, Arlene and Joan complicated

the meaning of family and negotiated with other peers their identity as “Filipino American” as neither here nor there but as *both*. Without toiling over the term, Mr. Q acknowledged the point of tension and repositioned himself among the group by joining the *kuwento*. The following excerpt illustrates the subtlety in the exchange.

- Arlene: What do you mean by Filipino values? Do you mean Filipino American?
- Mr. Q: What do you mean?
- Arlene: 'Cause some people, they got Filipino AND American values. Are you talking about Filipino American?
- Students: ()
- Arlene: [continuing] So, for example, in Joan's family, they don't really use Ilocano much at home and stuff. Joan and her sisters use hella English. Sometimes, her parents speak Ilocano, you know, phrases and stuff, here and there with the kids. Joan understands a little, but answers in English.
- Mr. Q: Good point. You're right, it's not so clear cut as it seems. We have to consider both.
- Joan: Yeah, so I found out that Arlene has a really big family all over the U.S. She has lots of aunties and uncles, and they live all over but her main family is here. She has two older brothers and a younger sister. . . Arlene is like one of her uncles in Tarlac, in the Philippines, 'cause that's who she gets her talking from.
- Students: ((laughing))
- Mr. Q: Oh yeah? That's like my brother-in-law who came with my younger sister to join the U.S. Army. Many of us lived in Alaska and then moved to San Francisco. So when my brother-in-law came in 1976, we settled in the Bay Area.

The whole-group discussion continued with several other students revealing what they produced from the “give one, get one, go on” exercise. Their shared stories signified different aspects of being “Filipino American” such as family values and family structures, regional provinces and languages in the Philippines (including Ilocano and Tagalog), migration and diaspora, and settlement in the United States, among others. Such sharing was key to the construction of Filipino Heritage Studies as a class and, in particular, in their collective study of the Spanish-American War and other related events in the 20th century. Each *kuwento* contributed to, in Mr. Q's words, “the connections we're making about ourselves, our histories, our cultures.” Each *kuwento* served as a pedagogical tool for expanding prior knowledge, gaining new understandings, and promoting empathy and empowerment among class members.

The presence of *kuwento* in Filipino Heritage Studies did not go unnoticed outside of the classroom. Students themselves revealed how *kuwento* assisted in their learning process. For example, Arlene in an interview added that even written stories about Philippine history are made relevant to students' lives because, as she put it, "Mr. Q relates [them] to us as if [they] are happening now and we can tie them to what's happening at home." Similarly, Gerry pointed out what he appreciated the most about a "live" class that engages its students and embraces their cultural backgrounds. He noted that "Mr. Q tells us about his childhood [to] give us imagination. . . . Instead of telling straight from the facts, he shares facts from his life. It makes us more interested. It makes ME more interested."

THE PLIGHT OF HIGH SCHOOL ETHNIC STUDIES

The use of *kuwento* in the context of Filipino Heritage Studies was deliberate and purposeful. For Mr. Q, it was not only about tapping into a cultural and sociolinguistic practice relevant to students but also significant in his forceful drive to establish Filipino Heritage Studies as a legitimate social studies class. This drive had often been confronted by the school administration, preferring a combined Filipino Heritage Studies *and* Tagalog language course instead of treating each subject separately. Tagalog had become a popular foreign language elective course among students as enrollment reached its limit within the inaugural year. According to Mr. Q, both courses "reflect the needs of our students" and offering them would contribute to the expansion of the school's ethnic studies programme. On the one hand, Filipino Heritage Studies would focus on critical multicultural history specific to Filipina/o Americans; on the other, Tagalog would serve as a classroom laboratory for students to gain introductory, intermediate, and advanced foreign language skills. The implementation of these interrelated subjects would be essential in order for students to interrogate epochs of relevant history as practised in traditional classrooms and textbooks and also to give attention to the serious study of the Tagalog language beyond everyday conversation. For Mr. Q, both courses would provide robust learning opportunities for delving into new concepts and expanding students' knowledge repertoire. Ironically, other teachers and administrators in the school had not shown the same regard or legitimacy for ethnic studies, a kind of dismissal that mirrors earlier struggles on university and college campuses (Yang, 2000). According to Mr. Q, the school's general attitude about Filipino Heritage Studies had been frustratingly offhand, that "there's really *nothing* to teach." He said,

That's what people who are outside the Filipino community say, just because *they* don't know anything doesn't mean that there's nothing to teach. So they equate what they don't know to everybody else's, *that's* the usual mistake of white folks

and the dominant culture. They always speak from their perspective and make decisions based on that perspective and assume that *that's* everybody else's perspective. That's why. That's what we talk about in class.

CONCLUSION

The lack of curricular materials for multicultural education or the opposition from the dominant culture does not negate the need for ethnic studies courses such as Filipino Heritage Studies. What Mr. Q and students illustrated in their use of *kuwento* is the power of a multicultural pedagogy that draws on the strengths of its participants. *Kuwento* (and *kuwento-kuwentohan*) in Filipino Heritage Studies served as an official space (sharing time) for affirming cultural knowledge, constructing history, and negotiating identity (Bruner, 1991; Michaels, 1981; Nieto, 2000; Ochs & Capps, 1996; White, 1980). *Kuwento* also shaped the curriculum (and vice versa), as well as validated participants' membership in class. It incited empathy and reified empowerment to assist students in understanding a complex set of historical events and cultural issues relevant in their lives. In short, *kuwento*, discussed during a unit on post-Spanish-American War, became an important pedagogical tool for promoting critical connections between seemingly disparate worlds and the distances between families and generations. It helped to name a collective experience without shying away from similarities and differences; it also provided an opportunity to explore the complexity of being Filipina/o American in present-day contexts. *Kuwento*, at the centre of teaching and learning, offered Mr. Q and the students alternative perspectives from which to draw to further shape their understanding of self and community.

Kuwento parallels the concept of story in many ways. It legitimises everyday cultural realities and narrows the gap between home and school through different connections between storytellers' and listeners' lives. Distinct to *kuwento*, however, is its ability to survive in a highly contested terrain of high school ethnic studies. For members of Filipino Heritage Studies, *kuwento* exists because of its power to transform pedagogy and curriculum, to manifest a dimension of multicultural education that continues to disrupt dominant discourses and the hidden curriculum in schools. *Kuwento* as discussed earlier offers a critical discursive space for exploring identity and building the concept of community beyond classroom walls. Echoing students' needs and concerns, Mr. Q noted the role that *kuwento* plays in their lives:

[Students] talk to me. They talk to me like I'm one of their relatives . . . like one of their uncles . . . they talk to me about their social life, how it's affecting their schoolwork. . . . I take on a role of a counselor . . . not a counselor as an officer, but a counselor that is part of the family (smiles and nods).

These intimations as revealed through *kuwento* reflect the importance of building social relationships. They remind us that classrooms are learning laboratories and microcosms of society that provide safe places to grow. *Kuwento* is far from static. It is malleable and is shaped by participants within particular sociocultural contexts. What has been described here within the context of Filipino Heritage Studies offers insights into a multicultural pedagogy that is part of a growing ethnic studies programme. It is an instantiation of larger struggles in multicultural education.

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ENDNOTES

¹Participant structures consist of four types: “(1) the teacher interacts with all of the students, (2) the teacher interacts only with some of the students in the class at once, (3) all of the students work independently at their desks, or (4) divided into small groups that they run themselves” (Phillips, 1972, p. 378).

²All names of locations and participants are pseudonyms. Donovan High is a racially diverse school with approximately 25% Chicana/o and Latina/o, 23% Asian, 20% White, 18% Filipina/o, 11% Black, 1% Pacific Islander, and 2% Other.

³The transcribed symbols used for the segments are as follows: *italics* for pronounced emphasis, brackets for observer’s added commentary, empty parentheses for unintelligible words or phrases, ((double)) parentheses for nonverbal behaviour, (single) parentheses for clarifying notes and other information, CAPITALISED words for increased volume, and ellipsis points for omitted data. Conventional punctuation marks are used to indicate ends of utterances or sentences, usually indicated by slight pauses on the audiotape. Commas refer to pauses within words or phrases.

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