8-2018

Asset-Based Teaching and Learning with Diverse Learners in Postsecondary Settings

Erika L. Mein
The University of Texas at El Paso, elmein2@utep.edu

Comments:
Technical Report: UTEP-CS-18-58

Asset-Based Teaching and Learning with Diverse Learners in Postsecondary Settings

Erika Mein
College of Education
The University of Texas at El Paso
El Paso, Texas

***Abstract*— This paper provides an outline of the conceptual underpinnings of an asset-based framework for teaching and learning (ABTL). It highlights five key characteristics of ABTL with culturally and linguistically diverse learners: inclusive, active/interactive, culturally-informed, linguistically responsive, and reflective/adaptive. The paper also provides examples of ABTL approaches in the postsecondary classroom, across disciplines**

Keywords—asset-based pedagogy; sociocultural theory; situated learning; authentic engagement; student-centered learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

The demographic composition of students in U.S. institutions of higher education is rapidly shifting. We know that 21st century learners are more digitally adept and more socially, economically, and culturally/linguistically diverse than at any moment historically. The University of Texas at El Paso's (UTEP) student body reflects these broader demographic changes taking place nationwide: more than 80% of UTEP students are Latina/o, with the majority identifying as bilingual; more than 50% of students are the first in their families to attend college; and roughly half of students are Pell-eligible (e.g. many of whom have annual family incomes of less than $20,000). For these reasons, UTEP is poised to be a pedagogical leader in approaches to maximizing 21st century student learning at the postsecondary level across disciplines, with a particular focus on linguistically diverse student populations.

Traditionally, Latina/o students in the K-20 pipeline – not unlike those at UTEP – have had to contend with deficit notions surrounding their academic performance and achievement. This deficit thinking has placed emphasis on students' deficiencies – whether in terms of language, cognition, or motivation, among other factors – rather than the structural conditions, such as inequitable funding for schools, that have tended to contribute to the persistent under-achievement of certain groups (Valencia, 2010).

As a challenge to deficit explanations of Latina/o student academic under-achievement, the recent 10-year student success framework adopted by UTEP, known as the UTEP Edge, advocates an asset-based approach to working with students both inside and outside of the classroom. Drawing on educational research as well community development literature, these asset-based pedagogical approaches emphasize students' individual and collective strengths, skills, and capacities as the starting point for learning and engagement. Such approaches do not claim to resolve the systemic conditions that contribute to persistent inequities experienced by minoritized students in the K-20 pipeline; rather, they are focused on reconfiguring teaching and learning to promote equity at the classroom level.

This paper provides an outline of the conceptual underpinnings of an asset-based framework for teaching and learning (ABTL), highlights key characteristics of ABTL with culturally and linguistically diverse learners, and provides examples of ABTL in the classroom, across disciplines

II. RESEARCH BASE

The concept and practice of asset-based pedagogy draws predominantly from two lines of research, the first in community development and the second, which is more developed, in education.

A. Asset-Based Community Development Theory

For decades, scholars and practitioners in the field of community development have emphasized the value of an asset-based approach to working with socially and economically marginalized communities. The binary contrast between a needs-based and asset-based approach was initially put forth by community development scholars John Kreztmann and John McKnight (1993) through a practice known as asset-based community development (ABCD). A needs-based approach, from this perspective, emphasizes what's missing in a particular community based on an externally-imposed standard; in this approach, change-focused interventions come from the outside rather from within and emphasis is placed on outside expertise rather than the expertise that exists in the community. In contrast, an asset-based approach focuses on existing capacity and resources within a community; all community members are viewed as valued contributors and as experts. The differences between a needs-based approach and asset-based approach from a community development perspective are outlined in Table 1.

The UTEP Edge has taken up this approach, translating it from a community development context to a classroom and institutional development context. In this way, the needs/assets paradigm can be applied to classroom settings, where students' assets serve as the basis for teaching and learning; it can also be applied beyond the classroom to other institutional settings, where faculty and staff assets are valued and viewed as the starting point for any institutional change, including curricular/programmatic efforts and strategic planning efforts.

Table 1. Needs versus asset-based approaches. Adapted from Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993

Community Development Approaches to Change	
Needs-Based	**Asset-Based**
• Focused on an imposed standard and deficits • Views community members as having things done to them • Minimizes community resources • Reactive • Sees community as in need of external experts	• Focuses on existing capacity and resources • Views community members as valuable contributors • Maximizes and recycles • Proactive • Sees community as expert

B. Educational Research on Asset-Based Approaches

With the field of education, interdisciplinary research from anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and psychology has contributed substantially to the research base on what can be classified generally as "asset-based approaches" in the classroom. Underlying this research is a Vygotskian theory of learning that views learning as a social process rather than solely an individual phenomenon that takes place strictly "in the head." Learning, in this way, takes place in and through action and interaction with others, within the context of practice ("learning-by-doing").

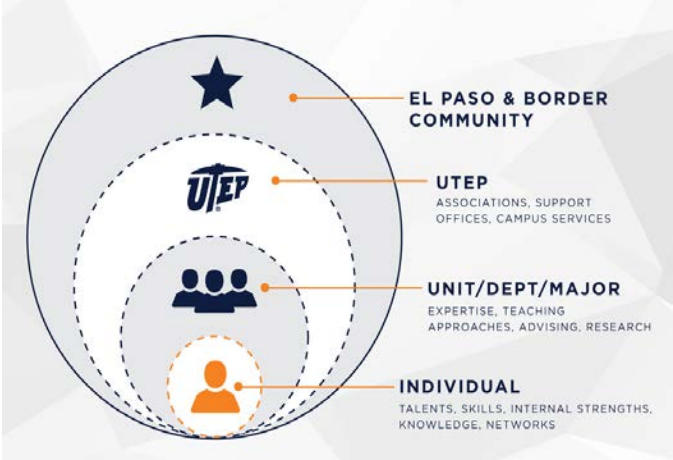
Departing from this broad perspective on learning, educational researchers have highlighted the knowledge, assets, and resources that students – especially minoritized students – bring to formal educational settings (e.g. schools). Educational anthropologists Norma Gonzalez and Luis Moll (2004), for instance, coined the phrase "funds of knowledge" to refer to the different kinds of household-based mathematical and linguistic knowledge that working-class Mexican American students brought to the classroom; their seminal work in this area not only shed light on students' out-of-school learning resources, but also challenged educators to learn about, use, and expand these funds of knowledge in the classroom.

Like the work done on "funds of knowledge," scholars in educational sociolinguistics have emphasized the linguistic resources – rather than deficits – that bilingual and multilingual students bring to the classroom, and the ways in which educators can leverage students' linguistic resources to promote academic learning. One particularly relevant strand of work in this area for UTEP is that of translanguaging pedagogy, which emphasizes that bilinguals have one full linguistic repertoire across multiple languages, and that fluid movement across the repertoire is normal and should be encouraged, particularly in learning contexts (Garcia, 2009; Garcia & Wei, 2014). Another important strand of research in this area – one led by educational researchers based at UTEP – is the work on language and literacy practices of border-crossing (transfronterizo) students at all levels. This growing body of research analyzes the rich array of knowledge and navigational strategies engaged by students who cross the US-Mexico border on a daily basis to attend schools at all levels (de la Piedra & Guerra, 2012; de la Piedra, Araujo, & Esquinca, 2018; Mein, 2012).

III. Asset-Based Framework for Teaching and Learning

Research and practice from the fields of both education and community development, then, have contributed to an extensive and still growing knowledge base about asset-based approaches to teaching and learning. Assets, from this perspective, are understood as the skills, strengths, and resources that exist in individuals, collectives, and communities. In this way, assets are viewed as simultaneously individual and shared, rather than possessed solely by individuals (see Figure 1 for sample). One example is that of bilingualism. Bilingualism is not something that develops in an isolated way in one's head; rather, it is developed in and through interaction with institutions and collectives such as the family, school, and community – in this way, bilingualism can be viewed as both an individual and shared asset.

Figure 1. Sample model of individual and collective assets.



Asset-based Teaching and Learning (ABTL) recognizes the strengths, skills, and resources of learners, using them as a starting point for learning. This approach toward pedagogy can take place within the classroom (a site of explicit teaching and learning) or within any space where explicit or implicit teaching and learning takes place (such as the workplace). For the purposes of this paper, the focus is on asset-based approaches to pedagogy within postsecondary classrooms. Asset-based Teaching and Learning is defined by five distinct characteristics which represent an outgrowth of the educational research and learning theory that underpin it. Figure 2 below provides a visual representation of these characteristics, which include:

A. Inclusive

Asset-based Teaching and Learning acknowledges that the vast majority of classrooms include learners representing diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and ways of learning. There is an acknowledgement that the sole reliance on more traditional forms of teaching and learning, such as lecture-based instruction, may not be optimal for all students all the time. ABTL recognizes that college faculty/instructors need to set the

conditions for optimal learning by implementing diverse teaching methods designed to reach diverse learners. In addition, research tells us that when learners – especially second language learners – feel welcome, safe, and comfortable, they will learn at much higher rates than if they feel unwelcome or insecure (see Krashen, 1982/2009). In the UTEP context, pedagogical methods that support inclusiveness – which should be discipline-specific – can include project-based learning, active learning, and translanguaging pedagogy (see Mein & Esquinca, 2017).

B. Active/Interactive

Sociocultural theories of learning emphasize the ways in which learning is a social process, mediated and sustained through language and interaction (Vygotsky, 1978), and situated in practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In other words, when learners are given the opportunity to engage with content by talking, writing, and "learning-by-doing," they tend to not only have better retention of information, they also have higher levels of understanding and analysis/synthesis/creation (as per Bloom's revised taxonomy of learning). Pedagogical methods that encourage active engagement run on a spectrum from individual to collective and from less to more highly-structured activities. One approach to encourage active engagement with content on an individual level is writing-to-learn, where students engage in informal writing through quick-writes or exit tickets to make sense of content and reflect on their learning; such writing can be a starting point for small group dialogue and can take place in the student's language of preference. Another way to encourage active engagement at the group level is through collaboration and teamwork, which can happen in less-structured ways (e.g. small group work related to a particular topic) or in more highly-structured ways (e.g. team projects; project-based learning).

C. Culturally-Informed

Postsecondary classrooms in the U.S., not unlike their K-12 counterparts, have typically reflected the norms and practices of middle- and upper-middle class white populations (Conrad & Gasman, 2017). This can be seen, for example, in the emphasis on Standard English in many classrooms (with little acknowledgement of students' home languages), and in the emphasis on content disconnected from students' experiences and backgrounds. In contrast, Asset-based Teaching and Learning recognizes that students bring diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and practices to postsecondary classrooms, and understands that teaching and learning should flexibly adapt to students' experiences in order to promote learning. Pedagogical approaches that account for culture, in all of its complexities, fall on a continuum: on one end, faculty/instructors demonstrate awareness of students' backgrounds and use that knowledge as a starting point for teaching content ("culturally-informed"); on the other end of the continuum is "culturally sustaining pedagogy," which favor the maintenance of non-dominant students' linguistic and cultural practices rather than promoting assimilation into dominant norms (Paris, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Teaching practices that involve students' use of their primary language(s) in the classroom to promote learning represent one example of a culturally sustaining approach.

D. Linguistically Responsive

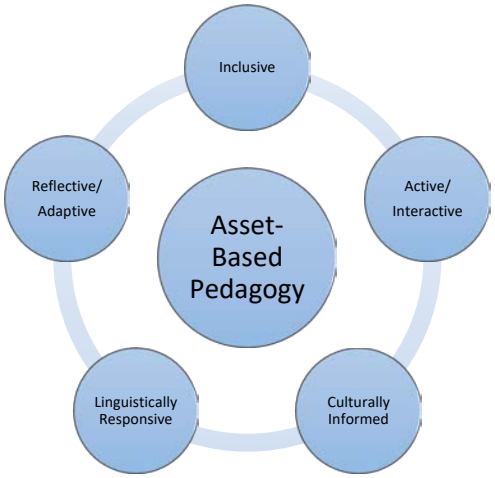
The majority of UTEP students report being bilingual (Spanish/English), and we know that these same students bring different kinds of bilingual proficiencies (e.g. conversational and/or academic proficiencies) to their studies. How we work with bilingual/multilingual students involves both stance and practice, that is, our beliefs about language(s) in the classroom and how we design our instruction with respect to language learners (de Jong, 2013; Lucas & Villegas, 2013). In many PK-20 classrooms in the United States, the default stance is one of monolingualism, where the assumption is that content should be taught exclusively in English without recognizing students' primary language(s) as a resource for learning (de Jong 2013; Cummins, 2005). Alternatively, a multilingual stance, among other things, understands the value of cross-linguistic transfer – that is, the knowledge that students can draw on what they know in one language (e.g. Spanish) and apply it in to learn content in another (e.g. English) (Cummins, 2005). Instructor and institutional approaches toward language, then, usually fall on a continuum: on one end of the continuum is the monolingual stance, which emphasizes English-only instruction and neglects to see students' language backgrounds and bilingual proficiencies as a resource for learning; on the other end of the continuum is a language maintenance stance, where emphasis is placed on the development and maintenance of students' reading, writing, speaking, and listening proficiencies in two or more languages. In the middle of the continuum we find a linguistically responsive stance, where emphasis is placed on using students' linguistic assets to facilitate meaningful content learning in English. Importantly, an instructor does not need to be bilingual or multilingual to adopt a linguistically responsive stance in the classroom; rather, they need to be language-aware and to value the linguistic assets that students bring to learning.

Linguistically responsive pedagogical approaches at the postsecondary level recognize the critical role that language plays in students' gaining access to disciplinary content (Lucas & Villegas, 2013; Schleppegrell, 2004). Academic language is distinct from conversational language; it is more specialized, more impersonal, and more abstract (Gibbons, 2009). Moreover, each discipline has technical vocabulary and ways of using language that are distinct from one another: the language of science, for example, emphasizes objectivity and procedures, with extensive use of passive voice, while the language of history emphasizes past events and relationships among them (Schleppegrell, 2004). Specific strategies to support bilingual students, and all students, in learning disciplinary language include, but are not limited to: using visual tools such as graphic organizers; using study guides that provide key questions to guide reading, key vocabulary, and outlines of major concepts; providing clear and explicit instructions both orally and in writing; encouraging students' use of their primary language and translanguaging (movement among languages), such as through intentional grouping; and setting the conditions for bilingual students to engage in meaningful learning through purposeful interactions and activities, e.g. jigsaws and other cooperative learning activities (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008).

E. Reflective/Adaptive

In spite of the commonplace belief that "good teaching" is an innate talent, educational researchers have shown, time and again, that teaching is not, in fact, natural (Ball & Forzani, 2009); rather, teaching expertise is learned and developed over time, through ongoing practice, feedback, and reflection. Providing opportunities for faculty and instructors (including Teaching Assistants) to reflect on problems of practice, while also providing opportunities to engage in structured peer observation and feedback, are two first steps to encouraging reflective practice and, in turn, the continuous improvement of teaching. In addition to structured reflection on problems of practice and peer observations, another approach to help build reflective teaching at the college level includes the establishment of "communities of practice" among faculty aimed at refining their teaching. In these ways, reflection not only takes place in isolation, but rather becomes a collective activity, where faculty/instructors are engaged in the collaborative work of improving the quality of their instruction, learning from one another and make ongoing adaptations to their teaching in the process.

Figure 2. Characteristics of Asset-Based Pedagogy



IV. Summary

Asset-based Teaching and Learning lies at the heart of the UTEP Edge's goal of sustained student success. ABTL represents a stance as well as a set of practices that recognizes and builds on the strengths, skills, and resources of learners to promote transformative learning. This paper outlines the conceptual and practical foundations for implementing ABTL at UTEP, with a particular focus on working with linguistically diverse students. Five core characteristics of ABTL were identified: inclusive, active/interactive, culturally-informed, linguistically-responsive, and reflective/adaptive. Sample pedagogical methods for each of the five characteristics were also outlined. Ultimately, enacting asset-based pedagogy on a widespread basis will contribute to UTEP's mission of access and excellence by paving the way for student access to transformative learning experiences in and through a commitment to excellence in teaching.

References

Ball, D.L. & Forzani, F.M. (2009). The work of teaching and the challenge for teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education, 60*(5), 497-511.

Canagarajah, S. (2011). Codemeshing in academic writing: Identifying teachable strategies of translanguaging. *Modern Language Journal, 95*, 401-17.

Conrad, C. & Gasman, M. (2017). *Educating a diverse nation: Lessons from minority-serving institutions.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Cummins, J. (2005). A proposal for action: Strategies for recognizing heritage language competence as a learning resource within the mainstream classroom. *Modern Language Journal, 89*(4), 585-592.

De Jong, E. (2013). Preparing mainstream teachers for multilingual classrooms. *Association of Mexican-American Educators (AMAE) Special Invited Issue, 7*(2), 40-49.

De la Piedra, M.T. & Guerra, J. (2012). The literacy practices of transfronterizos in a multilingual world. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 15*(6), 627-634.

De la Piedra, M.T., Araujo, B.E.,& Esquinca, A. (2018). *Educating across borders: The case of a dual language program on the U.S.-Mexico border.* Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona.

Garcia, O. (2009). *Bilingual education in the 21st century: A global perspective.* Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Garcia, O. & Wei, L. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism, and education.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gibbons, P. (2009). *English learners, academic literacy, and thinking: Learning in the challenge zone.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Gonzalez, N., Moll, L., & Amanti, C. (2004). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms*. New York: Routledge.

Krashen, S.D. (1982/2009). Principles and practice in second language acquisition [internet edition]. Oxford, UK: Pergamon. Available at: http://www.sdkrashen.com/content/books/principles_and_practice.pdf.

Kretzmann, J. & McKnight, J. (1993). *Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets.* Chicago: ACTA Publications.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2014). Culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0. *Harvard Educational Review, 84*(1), 74-84.

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Lucas, T., Villegas, A.M., & Freedson-Gonzalez, M. (2008). Linguistically responsive teacher education: Preparing teachers to teach English language learners. *Journal of Teacher Education, 59*(4), 361-373.

Lucas, T. & Villegas, A.M. (2013). Preparing linguistically responsive teachers: Laying the foundation in preservice teacher education. *Theory into Practice, 52*, 98-109.

Mein, E. (2012). Biliteracy in context: The use of L1/L2 genre knowledge in graduate studies. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* (Special Issue, Literacies Crossing Borders), *15*(6), 653-667.

Mein, E. & Esquinca, A. (2017). The role of bilingualism in shaping engineering literacies and identities. *Theory into Practice, 56*(4), 282-290.

Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher, 41*(3), 93-97.

Schleppegrell, M. (2004). *The language of schooling: A functional linguistics perspective.* New York: Routledge.

Valencia, R.R. (2010). *Dismantling contemporary deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice.* New York: Routledge.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind and society.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard.