

Angelina, Who Whispered in Three Languages: A Story of One Success in Arts Integration and International Collaboration

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In a virtual space between nations, children can come together to learn about and appreciate each other's culture—and their own. As the Co-Executive Director of Blue Planet Writers' Room, a nonprofit writing center in West Palm Beach, Florida, I was one of the creators of an international collaboration through which we taught arts-integrated writing workshops and partnered students at North Grade Elementary School in Lake Worth, Florida, with their peers at Habla: The Center for Language and Culture in Mérida, Mexico. As the students interacted and contributed to the creation of an online showcase for their work, they were learning about more than writing and art: they were also learning to appreciate their own heritages and those of their local and international peers, and they were coming to realize that multilingualism is a valuable gift. This article discusses the larger context, methods, and goals of the collaborative project and traces the progress and experience of one trilingual student, Angelina, a ten-year-old North Grade third-grader from a Guatemalan family.

What Came Before

The path to our experience at North Grade began when my business partner, Susan Gay Hyatt, and I approached North Grade Elementary about implementing an after-school writing program for their third-through fifth-graders. Susan and I founded Blue Planet Writers' Room four years ago in order to teach creative writing through the integration of the arts, technology, and international collaboration. We had received funding from the Center for Creative Education (CCE), a local organization dedicated to integrating the arts into academic subjects, to target this school that served a diverse population of students, many of whose families had moved to the US from the Caribbean, Central America, and South America, and many of whom were English language learners. This demographic makeup suggested to us that in addition to arts integration, an international component would help ensure the success of the project. I have a special interest in these transnational partnerships: growing up in a family of immigrants from two different countries, I was surrounded by three languages—French, Italian, and English—and the cultures, foods, and traditions of French Canada, Sicily, and the US. This was

not a problem in our little Long Island town, where most of the neighbors were Italian immigrants or had parents who had made the crossing. A lot of Italian was spoken in our house, and in the summers, my sister and I practiced our French up in Canada with the cousins. To me, the mix of cultures simply meant that we did a lot of things that were not quite “American”—like



feasting on the Christmas octopus instead of the Christmas turkey.

At North Grade, though, that effortless mingling of cultures was not the norm, especially for the children whose families were from Guatemala or the Yucatán region of Mexico and whose first languages were Spanish and Kanjobal (pronounced *kahn-ho-BAHL*) or one of the other Mayan languages. Their multilingualism was not admired—it was considered a stigma.

“They won’t identify as Kanjobal speakers,” Debbie Battles, North Grade’s principal at the time, told us about these students. “If pressed, they’ll admit that their parents speak it, but they’ll deny their own knowledge of it. We know they speak it, though, because in many cases the parents don’t speak English, and when we have to interact with them, the children have to translate for them.” The Mayan language, it seems, betrayed the children as belonging to families of poor migrant workers and placed them squarely

on the bottom rung of the school’s social ladder. Teased for their imperfect English and their accents, which they couldn’t yet shed or hide, and looked down on for their lack of status sneakers and expensive electronics, these students that possessed the gift of speaking and understanding three languages were concealing their backgrounds and disavowing any knowledge of their family’s native tongue.

Debbie told us that Angelina was one of these students. Though she had been born in the United States, her family was from Guatemala, and her first languages were Kanjobal and Spanish. Embarrassed and trying not to be singled out as Mayan, she was terribly shy, quiet, and serious. Debbie, who seemed to know every student in her school and was wonderfully supportive of creative initiatives, was delighted that our project would involve the participation of students in Mexico, and she had hand-selected Angelina for inclusion, hoping that the experience would help her blossom into a more confident child. In fact, Debbie helped select many of the club’s students, creating a truly diverse mix of children from different backgrounds, ethnicities, and ability levels.

To create the international component, we partnered the children with a group of Habla’s students. Habla is an innovative organization; its founders, Kurt Wootten and Maria del Mar Patron-Vazquez, have dedicated their careers to employing arts integration in foreign language learning, specifically Spanish and English. We planned to have our students and theirs engage in written exchanges and parallel activities, creating the content for a website that would showcase their work. We intended to use the collaboration for a number of purposes that are similar to those of a traditional arts-integrated project—to provide motivation and an authentic audience, for example—but also for the unique benefits, such as improved

tolerance and global awareness, that such a partnership can provide.



The Third Space

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha writes about the “Third Space” between cultures where colonized people and migrants are forced to exist. No longer living exclusively in the world they were born into, and not inscribed as full members of the culture of the colonizers or of their adopted country, they occupy a liminal space between cultures, between languages, between spheres of power. This in-between space has traditionally been viewed as a place of disenfranchisement and confusion—but, Bhabha asserts, it can be reframed as a positive space, a space where, by existing outside of both cultures, the “hybrid” individual can view them more clearly. Colonized, migrant, or otherwise hybridized writers, especially, can then comment on the positive and negative aspects of both cultures and can help effect change. Bhabha asserts the importance of the Third Space in opposing blind nationalism and xenophobia:

...We should remember that it is the “inter”—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the inbetween space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories

of the “people.” And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves. (56)

Avoiding polarity, validating histories that cross national boundaries, and recognizing the others in our selves—these concepts all tie back to my own upbringing, and in 2009, during our first international collaboration with teaching artists and students from Ireland, Bhabha was very much on my mind. It occurred to me that we were, in effect, purposely creating a *technological* Third Space between the two nations. In that liminality that existed only on a screen, students from two countries were able to interact and create together in ways that would not be possible in the “real” world because of the time and distance involved. In the partnerships we have formed since then, Susan and I have given a lot of thought to the best ways in which to use this in-between space for the benefit and empowerment of the immigrant children we teach—the children who already exist in that Third Space between the predominantly English-speaking United States and their families’ native countries and languages. We are excited by Bhabha’s analysis of liminal spaces, as when he notes the ways in which a staircase functions between levels of a racially themed Renée Green art installation: “This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (5). *Difference without hierarchy*: instead, a recognition and appreciation of what makes us alike and what makes us different and the creation of a liminal space in which to foster that ideal. This is what we continually seek to accomplish as we translate Bhabha’s critical theories into the simple language of the workshops we lead for children of various ethnic backgrounds.

This is what we hoped to achieve with Angelina and her classmates.

The Students and the Team

So there we were, on that spring afternoon, in a room filled with twenty third, fourth, and fifth graders. Their families were from countries including Mexico, Peru, Guatemala, and Haiti. We were told that some were enthusiastic writers while others were still learning to communicate clearly in English. Some were middle-class teachers' children, while others were far lower on the socioeconomic scale.

Susan and I were the writing teachers; because my degrees are in music education and creative writing while Susan's are in theatre and she is currently a PhD candidate in education, we always bring the hybridity of our combined art forms, experience, and schooling to the projects we undertake. We were fortunate to also have the involvement of Pat David Parry, a teaching artist specializing in visual art and photography, who has spent many years as a teaching artist for CCE, working with classroom teachers to integrate the arts into their subjects. Ollie Butler was our teaching web designer. Ollie is a filmmaker as well as a graphic/web artist; among other projects, she co-wrote, co-produced, and co-directed the documentary *Ripiblik*, which shares stories gathered from residents of Haiti.

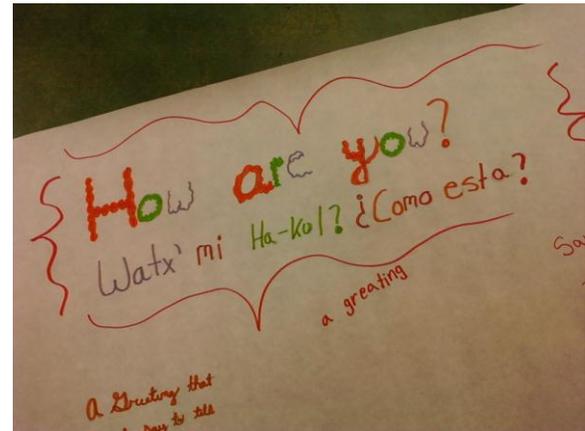
In Mexico, our colleague at Habla was Karla Hernando Flores, a talented, bilingual teaching artist who was using the project to enhance her elementary school-level English language class. In addition to teaching English and Spanish at Habla, Karla also leads professional development workshops on arts integration for teachers in Mexico and the United States. Her group

was small; generally, it varied in number between five and seven students. Following a number of pre-workshop meetings in which we discussed the purpose and structure of what we were about to do (meetings that Karla attended via Skype), we began.

What We Did

We met with the North Grade students after school for fourteen weeks, twice a week, for an hour and a half. One day a week, half the session was dedicated to Pat, who led the students in art activities like creating family collages to accompany their writings about family traditions. On the other day each week, half the session was given over to Ollie, who led the children in choosing a website name, creating a logo, selecting design elements, and maintaining Internet safety. She also taught them some basic HTML code and showed them how to upload their own work.

Because we knew from experience that students in both



locations would be curious about how the others lived, we decided to center most of the writing and art activities on the students themselves—their daily lives, their families, their favorite meals, their holiday traditions, and their hopes for the future. In this way, the students in both nations would be teaching as they were learning,

developing a greater appreciation for their own backgrounds even as they were finding out about the culture of their international partners. To accommodate the ESL (English as a Second Language) status of many of the children, we told them that they could write in any languages they knew, as long as they also wrote in English. (Our Haitian student could speak, but not write, Haitian Creole, so he wrote only in English.) We also stressed to the students the importance of writing in *correct* English, because this work was not going to disappear—it was going to be published online, to be read and enjoyed by their peers in Mexico and anyone else who might be interested. At Habla, Karla also allowed her students to write in Spanish and English so that their creativity could still flower in their native language even when their English limited their ability to express themselves.

Ever-Widening Circles

We started the workshops with activities focused on who the students were. They learned about, and took, photographic portraits and self-portraits. They wrote elfchens—eleven-word poems—about themselves. We reminded Angelina to write hers in all three languages, if she could. She seemed doubtful, but she did it, though her English “translation” of her elfchen didn’t quite match her Spanish and Kanjobal versions.

Angelina’s Elfchens

Angelina
 reading book
 here in Florida
 making book, happy, smart,
 laugh

(In Spanish)

Angelina
 Leer, escribir
 Aquí en la biblioteca
 Feliz, sabía, risueño, alegre
 Emocionada
 (In Kanjobal)

Angelina
 Leer, tipiyo
 Detie en la libreriya
 Feliz, sabia, teye
 Emocionada

In Spanish and Kanjobal her third line translates to “here in the library,” while her English version has her “here in Florida.” In English she is “reading



book” and “making book”—the poems were going into handmade folded books that day—while in the other two languages she is reading and writing (*leer, escribir* [sic] and *leer, tipiyo* [sic]). There are other differences—she lists more synonyms for “happy” in the non-English languages—but

the meanings of the little poems are close. And we were delighted that she was writing in Kanjobal, something we had been told she never did voluntarily.

The students also wrote pieces of memoir called “When I Was a Kid in Kindergarten,” telling the stories of their very first day of school. Angelina remembered her apprehension, writing, in English only, “The door in the hallway was as big as a kangaroo. I was as scared as a scared cat when he falls out of a tree.” In addition, they wrote letters to the students at Habla, talking about themselves and asking questions about life in Mérida. “What do you like about Mexico?” they asked. “How old are you?” “Who lives in your family (pets count)?” We were pleased that Angelina wrote her letter in Spanish; she told us that it would be “easier for the Mexican students to read.” In the midst of using art and writing to re-create themselves as superheroes, the Mexican children wrote back, asking their own questions: “What superheroes you like the most?” “What powers would you have if you were a superheroe [*sic*]?” Our students responded to these by inventing their own superheroes, including the intrepid Firestar Girl, Snarl the Spine-Wolf, and Acid Spit Guy.

We had the students write and create in ever-widening circles, starting with these pieces about themselves, then asking them to write and make art about their families, their pets, and their favorite meals and holiday traditions. Angelina described both her family and her preferred food in English and Spanish:

Rice with Meat and Vegetables

Rice is my favorite meal because my mom makes yellow rice and white rice and meat. The yellow rice and white rice taste good with meat and I like it with potatoes. They taste yummy. They are so so delicious.

This is a Guatemalan meal. I eat with my mom, dad, sister, brother, little sister, and grandpa. I eat in my house or outside at my mom’s round table. It is a holiday meal. My mom was born in Guatemala and my dad was born in Guatemala, my brother was born here, my sister was born here, my little sister was born here, my grandpa was born in Guatemala, and I was born here.

Arroz con Carne y Vegetales

Arroz es mi favorita comida porque mi mama hace arroz amarillo y arroz blanco con carne. El arroz blanco es rico con carne y yo gusta las papas. Las papas son muy ricos. Las papas son deliciosos. Este es la comida de Guatemala. Yo come con mi mamá, papá, hermana, mi hermano, mi pequeña hermana y mi abuelo. Come en la ronda mesa de mi mamá o en la casa. Este es la comida de festivál. Mi mamá se nació en Guatemala y mi papá se nació en Guatemala. Mi hermano se nació en Florida. Mi pequeña hermana se nació en Florida. Mi hermana se nació en Florida. Mi abuelo se nació en Guatemala y yo me nació en Florida.



The circle widened again as the children wrote about their favorite places in South Florida, and then we ended up in the infinite circles of their imaginations,

having them recreate themselves as the superheroes mentioned above; design a land of their own; and craft lovely, small poems titled “This is a Book of Dreams.”

Because we wanted to include media files on the website—which the students named *Tiger Paws* (after their school mascot, the tiger)—we often made audio recordings of the children reading their work. Most of them were delighted to speak their stories into the digital recorder—but Angelina was not. Though we had been able to convince her to write in her three languages, we could not get her to speak in them. She was too shy, and besides, that would leave no room for doubt regarding her fluency in Kanjobal. To record her voice, we had to let her lead us to the far corner of the media center and allow her to face the wall. Only then would she look down and whisper her poems and stories, in English, Spanish, and Kanjobal, into the recorder. Her voice was so quiet that we were never able to use her recordings—but we kept encouraging her to make them, anyway.

During the course of the workshops, we began creating a small glossary of terms in English, Spanish, and Kanjobal; we liked the idea that we could add to this activity in future workshops. We asked the Spanish and Kanjobal language facilitators at North Grade to translate a handful of English words and phrases for us—words like *mother*, *father*, *write*, *work*, and *home*. We placed large pieces of butcher paper on the media center’s tables, and then we passed out slips of paper that contained a word or phrase in the three languages. We gave the students bright markers and sent them to the sheets of paper to write their words and respond to them, either by defining them or by using them in a sentence. A number of the children wrote in English and Spanish—and Angelina was also writing in Kanjobal. Her response to “Write - Escribir - Tipyo” was:

Para escribir de tu vida o tu comida favorita. [*Spanish*]

Se que tipyo de vida o tu lope favorita. [*Kanjobal*]

[*English translation*: “To write about your life and your favorite food.”]

During this assignment, she was getting attention—and it wasn’t negative. The children weren’t teasing her about her ability—they were impressed by it. They started asking her to help translate *their* comments into Spanish and Kanjobal. And Angelina, quietly and patiently, did just that. When the monolingual students couldn’t get her help quickly enough, they turned to the other Spanish speakers in the group—the children from Mexico and Peru. Suddenly, having two languages was being recognized as a pretty cool thing.

As the workshops went on, Angelina displayed more confidence when interacting with the other students. It was easier for her to talk casually with the other children now that she knew she wouldn’t be mocked. On the contrary, exhortations of “Teach me to say something in Kanjobal!” were becoming common. And as we continued to remind the students that their new friends in Mexico spoke the same languages as Angelina and the other Spanish speakers in the group, she and the others began to show pride in their multilingual abilities. Debbie Battles confirmed that what we were seeing in the workshops was carrying over into the school day.

“You have to understand that a few months ago, Angelina was silent and shy. Now she grins and talks to me in the hall,” she reported. “A few months ago, none of our Mayan children would admit to being multilingual. Now they stop me and say,

‘Ms. Battles, I speak Kanjobal—can’t I be in the writing club, too?’” Apparently, word was getting around that writing club was a lot of fun—and that speaking other languages was something to be glad about.

What We Learned

Over the course of this project, we found that international collaboration can be an effective extension of and enhancement to an arts-integrated initiative, providing:

- A **motivational entry-point**: writing and making art with children from another country and then publishing that work online provided a “cool factor” that got the students excited about doing their best work.
- The opportunity for the American students to get to know international students who spoke the same languages as the immigrant children in the American group. This experience provided **validation of diverse languages and heritages**.
- The opportunity to write in different languages led to a **celebration of the differing abilities** that Angelina and her multilingual peers had initially tried to hide.
- The participation of the Mexican students provided an **authentic audience** for the American students’ work.

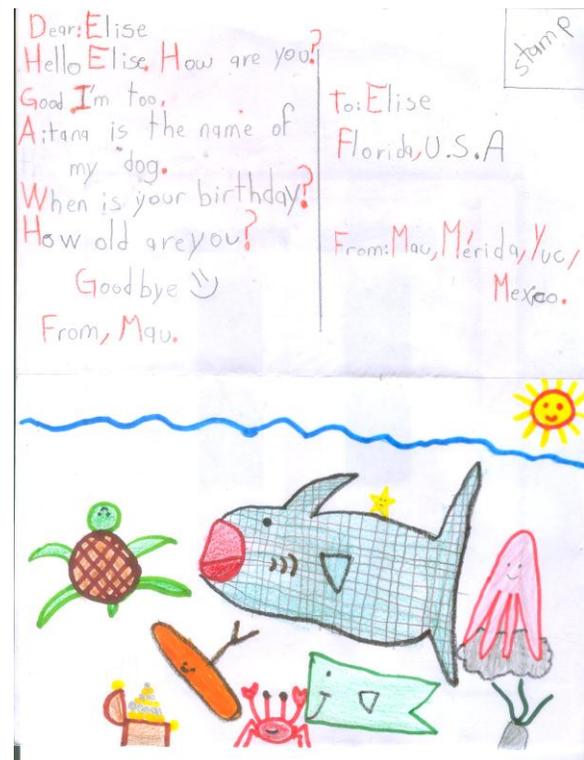
The collaboration also provided benefits that are unique to the creation of a technological Third Space. The cyber-connection enabled students to:

- Learn about a different culture and languages directly from their peers, thereby **improving their global awareness**.
- Gain an appreciation for their own culture and ethnic backgrounds by

sharing them with their new international friends.

- Develop **tolerance and appreciation** for what once seemed unbearably “foreign” in their classmates.

And on the way to accomplishing these outcomes, what was our biggest challenge? It was technological: though the media center was equipped with computers, internet access, and a digital projector, the school district maintains a strict Internet firewall, so accessing sites that we wanted to use with the children—especially when Ollie was teaching them about Internet safety and web design—was difficult and sometimes impossible. In later semesters of the project, we also faced roadblocks in connecting students via e-conferencing programs, again because of limitations imposed by the district. As cyber-collaboration becomes more common and more central to educational projects, we hope that school districts will re-examine their Internet policies, allowing these valuable connections to be made more easily.



And On the Last Day...

We ended the first semester of the Tiger Paws project with a celebration—cupcakes and fruit punch and the “unveiling,” on the media center’s projection screen, of the website the students had created at www.tigerpawsonline.org. In the next semester there would be more parallel projects with the Mexican students, more interaction between the two groups, and a face-to-face meeting via the Internet...but for the moment, we were pleased at all we had been able to accomplish in the project’s pilot period. As part of the celebration, we staged an author reading, asking students to come up to the podium and read their favorite piece of writing to the group. Imagine our delight when it was Angelina’s turn and she stood, smiled, and announced, “I’d like to read my piece in Spanish.” And she did.

Work Cited

- Bhabha, Homi K., *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Cora Bresciano is the co-founder and executive director of Blue Planet Writers’ Room, a nonprofit creative writing organization based in South Florida. With multiple citizenships, languages, and art forms in her background, Cora has a deep interest in what can be accomplished in the liminal spaces where cultures meet.