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Transiciones: Pathways of Latinas and Latinos Writing in High School and College

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Transiciones: Pathways of Latinas and Latinos Writing in High School and College

Todd Ruecker

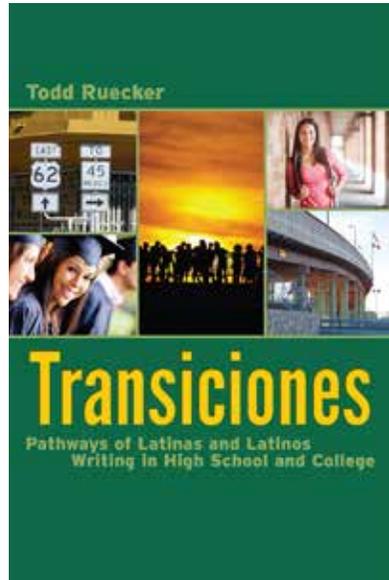
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Reviewed by Brad Jacobson

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At first glance, Todd Ruecker's *Transiciones: Pathways of Latinas and Latinos Writing in High School and College* might seem a strange fit for a review in *Community Literacy Journal*. It is, after all, a study of high school to college transitions with a primary focus on classroom writing experiences. However, readers of *CLJ* will appreciate Ruecker's capacious approach to this important literacy transition, as he works to construct the networks of relationships and sponsors that support or hinder the transition for each student. In doing so, he calls for a more complex understanding of literacy transitions that can help shift the popular discourse from a focus on deficits, in which Latina/o students fail, to one of how institutions can better serve these traditionally underserved students. Following others in literacy studies, Ruecker believes institutions can and must change, and he seeks to "imagine the ways high schools and universities can facilitate Latina/o student transitions into a more economically successful life" (147). Because of an action research approach that extends beyond only what takes place within classrooms, his findings offer possibilities for ways universities can better engage communities as well as how community organizations can support students as they engage the challenges of the college writing transition. Ruecker's work holds great value for all readers interested in supporting the success of college-going students.

As Ruecker explains in Chapter 1, a re-examination of mainstream instructional practices at the college level is necessary because the demographics of incoming college students no longer represent the "typical" white, middle-class, English-speaking student living on campus. Brief descriptions of the student participants in this ethnographic study help to support the statistical assertions offered. While all seven student participants attended the same high school in the border town of El Paso, Texas, they each brought different resources, abilities, and histories. Only one, for example, self-reported English as his first language. While some were educated in U.S. schools from K–12, one student reported starting as late as 8th grade. One of the



participants traveled across the border from Mexico every day for his education. These brief histories will be familiar to readers with experience working in border regions.

To engage the complexity of the literacy transition across institutions for these students from ethnically and linguistically minoritized backgrounds, Ruecker draws from Tara Yosso's theory of community cultural wealth, which reinterprets Pierre Bourdieu's notions of habitus and capital through a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens. As Ruecker explains, Yosso's work challenges the deficit perspective that students lack the proper capital or habitus for success, as she begins with the assumption that minority communities possess cultural wealth, and identifies six types of community cultural wealth: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital (20). By adapting Yosso's model in his own analysis, Ruecker shifts from what could be a deficit-based analysis to an exploration of the ways in which students utilize their varied resources when they encounter challenges in the high school to college transition.

In Chapter 2, we are offered an overview of the differing writing experiences offered across institutional contexts. The impact of standardized testing heavily influences writing instruction at Samson High School (SHS), a school serving predominantly low-income Latina/o students, leading to a "culture of testing" that causes an ESL teacher to devote the majority of class time to test preparation materials (31). The value placed on student test achievement leads to limited writing opportunities for students in mainstream (non-AP) classes until senior English. Outside factors also influence writing instruction at the local community college. With five course schedules and teaching loads with multiple preparations, instructors have little time to innovate or bring an outdated curriculum based on the rhetorical modes in line with current disciplinary thinking. In contrast, Borderlands University (BU), a land-grant institution with a new writing program director and an influx of funding, hosts a transformed writing program with a new first-year writing curriculum focusing on building situated literacies. While Ruecker clearly implies a preference for this model, his purpose here is not to make judgments, but rather to show that at each institution external factors led to disparate writing opportunities for students. These in-depth descriptions based on curriculum recovery, observations, and interviews offer important insights into the potential literacy paths of students. These differences become an important lens for understanding the importance of community capital in writing transitions.

The next four chapters include the case studies, organized by the degree of success in the student's transition. For each case study, Ruecker offers a holistic description of the student, including personal and academic histories, describes writing experiences in high school and the first year of college, and concludes with a visual map and analysis of the student's resource network. Ruecker takes an action research stance and becomes a part of his participants' lives and academic transition. Whether he is helping a student acquire an internet connection at her home, responding to a text message about a paper at 10 p.m. on a Friday night, or copy-editing a draft in the hour before it is due, Ruecker places himself in the text as he participates in the experiences. This personal touch enlivens the narratives and provides a grounded ethos to his arguments. Interviews with the students, their teachers, and select administrators also provide

depth that could not be gleaned by simply reading essays and evaluating curricula.

The value of Ruecker's methodology emerges first in Chapter 3, as Daniel struggles in his transition to community college. Daniel felt like he hadn't been pushed hard enough in high school, and his first-year composition (FYC) instructor accommodated him by allowing handwritten essays and going out of her way to follow up when he missed class. An interview shows a teacher who cares and tries to support students from diverse backgrounds, but Ruecker suggests that sometimes accommodating a struggling student can have unintended effects. In Daniel's case, it, "appeared to help ... and hurt him," as Daniel himself blamed the low expectations of his high school teachers for the habits that he brought to college, and admitted that his overly supportive FYC instructor led to laziness (51). Only by triangulating this data among interviews, observations, and high school and college curricula could Ruecker come to such a nuanced claim that challenges teachers and administrators to critically reflect on our own practices.

In Chapter 4, we learn from narratives of two students who faced challenges but succeeded well enough in their first year to be considered on track. We see the importance of sponsorship outside the classroom, as both students draw from community networks of capital as they navigate the college transition. For example, Bianca gains both financial and emotional support from her church, one of the few places where she interacts with college graduates. She also gains sponsorship from the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) at the state university, a support program for the children of migrant workers that includes some funding and summer programming including mandatory tutoring and study hours. Bianca was awarded with legal guardianship of her younger siblings after her mother was deported when she was a junior in high school, and an aunt stepped in to watch her siblings while Bianca participated in the summer program. These support networks were essential for Bianca's success; without them, college would not be possible. Similarly, Yesenia actively seeks support from teachers, instructors, tutors, and Ruecker as she navigates her transition. Once fearful of asking her eighth grade teacher to slow down even when she didn't fully understand English, Yesenia adapts well to college writing by drawing from her resources. Through these narratives we see the benefit of Ruecker's resistance to deficit-based analysis. One could view the participant's respective situations through what they lack—inadequate preparation from their high school, family responsibilities that could impinge on academic time, financial struggles—but a focus on community cultural wealth demonstrates the ways in which extracurricular resources can be just as influential to success.

The "smooth transitions" in Chapter 5 show students with well-developed networks of capital that serve to mitigate their challenges. Carolina arrived in U.S. schools in the eighth grade with little English ability, but a strong support network, including a supportive mother and a local Catholic community center. Carolina's support network offered homework help, tutoring, and computer classes, all of which helped her to build a strong academic foundation and some of the interpersonal skills necessary for college success. Initially shy and soft-spoken, Ruecker reports that Carolina "came across as

a different person” after a few weeks of college (101). Out-of-school sponsorship, including a school leadership group that travelled to Washington, D.C. in the summer before her first year, helped her gain confidence in her communication skills and abilities to take on challenges. Ruecker implies that these sources of capital, in addition to Carolina’s motivation and work ethic, allow her to succeed despite challenges.

It will not surprise most *CLJ* readers that Ruecker locates no silver bullet, no one particular resource that will secure a successful transition. In Chapter 6 we meet Paola, a student who faces many challenges, but succeeds in her first semester at community college. Initially uncertain about attending college and known as a rebellious student, Paola embraces the learning process, checking out books from the library and reporting that she did all the reading for her classes. Over winter break, however, Paola seems to lose her motivation. She moves in with her boyfriend, spending the weekends with him in Juárez. With limited internet access, she was forced to complete all of her homework on Sunday nights, leaving her exhausted and unprepared for Monday classes. She dropped all of her courses in the February of her second semester. Her story illustrates the “unpredictable nature of students’ paths to and through college” (138) and shows that interpersonal networks impact students in multiple ways. Paola’s story also serves to remind readers that the writing transition is only one of many factors in successful transitions to higher education, a point Ruecker returns to frequently in the final two chapters.

Ruecker admirably brings the case studies together in Chapter 7, titled “Contextualizing Transitions to College.” He synthesizes the findings into a few key takeaways: First, the participants in this study were not prepared for college writing; none of them had experience writing the kinds of analytical essays they were expected to write in college. Next, he draws on Bourdieu to discuss the roles of habitus and capital in the institutional transition, using the term “hysteresis” to describe the lag that occurs when a person’s habitus is slow to adapt to a new environment (143). Through this lens, we can see how some of the participants appear to have developed the college-going habitus in high school, while others did not have this same habitus, but their strong networks of community capital helped them to work through the hysteresis and build the college-going habitus over the course of their first year. However, as Paola’s story demonstrates, “any theory of transition, such as Bourdieu’s, is always limited by the complexity of human lives” (144). While Ruecker’s research illuminates the importance of sponsors like church organizations, community networks, and scholarship programs in the literacy transition from high school to college, he reminds us that he was not able to stop three of his participants from dropping out of college, and he calls on other teachers and sponsors to “recognize that there are limits to what we can accomplish” (153).

Chapter 8 is a call to scholars, administrators, and literacy educators to consider ways to encourage institutional change that can better serve all students. First, Ruecker offers suggestions for instruction that would benefit linguistic minority students. He calls for a renewed focus on written feedback in an effort to improve scaffolding the development of students, as the students in this study did not receive sufficient feedback

to help them develop skills quickly. Ruecker also advocates for more opportunities to build on the multiple literacies students bring by conducting cross-cultural rhetorical analyses or even providing bilingual courses. But Ruecker also recognizes that “what goes on beyond our classrooms matters much more,” and calls on those working in writing instruction and administration “to work for much broader and ambitious transformations beyond their institutions” (156). He proposes service-learning and community-engaged pedagogy as one way to make visible the university-community relationship and increase engagement among students.

The institution itself, then, must change. In a recent retrospective on Deborah Brandt’s *Literacy in American Lives*, Eli Goldblatt and David Joliffe suggest that “sponsors [of literacy] may have to undergo transformations they neither expect nor welcome” if they wish to engage with “groups not originally included in their charters or mission” (128). Ruecker’s engaging, carefully researched ethnographic study serves to support this claim and act as a call to action. His work calls on scholars, teachers, and literacy practitioners to continue to push institutions toward change in order to better support the literacy transitions and life opportunities of Latina/o students.

Works Cited

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