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## Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms

Chiara Cannella  
*University of Arizona*

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*Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms.* Norma González, Luis C. Moll, and Cathy Amanti, eds. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005. 320 pp. ISBN: 0-8058-4918-1. \$34.50.

*A Review by Chiara Cannella*  
*Ph.D. Candidate in Language, Reading, and Culture*  
*at the University of Arizona*



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This volume documents the theoretical origins as well as applications and incarnations of the funds of knowledge approach to educational research. The original Funds of Knowledge project entailed research collaboration among university faculty, graduate students, and public school teachers in an effort to increase teachers' repertoires for educating children from marginalized communities. The project engaged public school teachers in anthropological inquiry into the social practices of their students' families and communities, and it has sparked in the field of education an expanded understanding of home visits. While this work is embedded in the context of formal schooling, the funds of knowledge approach is also relevant and applicable to literacy work outside institutional settings. In fact, the original funds of knowledge work was called the Community Literacy Project, as it aimed to identify the knowledges and literacy practices of families and communities to help teachers build on links between family histories, community contexts, and classroom practice.

The volume is divided into four sections:

- ✓ The first section describes the theoretical foundations of funds of knowledge work as well as the initial projects; several of these chapters have been previously published as journal articles.
- ✓ The chapters in section two describe various projects from across the country that have borrowed from and built on the original funds of knowledge model. These chapters focus more specifically on the practical aspects of the work, such as Martha Floyd Tenery's initial trepidation upon entering the homes of her students and building relationships with their families, and Patricia Sandoval-Taylor's description of how she incorporated into classroom curricula information gleaned from funds of knowledge research.



- ✓ Section three addresses some of the challenges faced by both teachers and university faculty as they engage in such a collaborative research process. Patricia Buck and Paul Skilton Sylvester, for example, describe how they struggled to incorporate funds of knowledge work in a teacher education curriculum.
- ← In the final section, Luis Moll locates the funds of knowledge work in current educational and political contexts and considers, with “the benefit of hindsight,” the relevance of social class, gender, and sustainability on funds of knowledge work, as well as potential areas for future research (275).

The funds of knowledge approach begins with the anthropologically based assumption that people are competent and act according to strategic decisions based on their experiences. It is the researcher’s task to understand and articulate the systems of logic that inform their decisions. This is in direct contradiction to deficit models of understanding that often characterize low-income families and families of color as being pathological and dysfunctional, incapable of raising competent children. (For a complete discussion of deficit thinking, see Richard Valencia’s work, *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking*.)

Building on the concept of social capital, the term “funds of knowledge,” originally described by Velez-Ibanez and Greenberg in 1992 and reprinted here, refers to the social resources and reciprocal networks that families rely on to respond to changing economic opportunity. For teacher-researchers, rather than anthropologists, funds of knowledge refers to the knowledges and skills discovered in the homes and communities of their students. Teacher-researchers have found that visiting students’ homes reveals family knowledge that can be drawn on in the classroom, such as auto repair, carpentry, bilingualism, cooking, and horticulture. Through study group reflection and analysis, educators incorporate aspects of this knowledge into class curricula, creating stronger connections between families and schools.

This approach allows students to build on their home literacies in a school context. For example, Sandoval-Taylor found that many students’ families knew something about construction; home construction projects were common, and many students had seen or participated in construction. Several students had their own building tools, and many had heard family discussions about construction projects. So in collaboration with colleagues from her funds of knowledge study group, she designed a unit on construction. Students created blueprints, read literature related to construction, and created a class construction dictionary. Students surveyed their parents about their construction experience, and several were recruited as “expert consultants.” She found that students’ writing improved dramatically over the course of the unit as they built on existing conceptual knowledge to learn new vocabulary and communicate complex ideas. Though precise strategies vary across contexts, this work is marked by an intentional effort to disrupt conventional assumptions about where knowledge resides—in schools and teachers, or in families and communities. Rather than legitimating only formal school literacy, the funds of knowledge approach acknowledges the multi-faceted aspects of peoples’ literacy experiences and attempts to create a framework for connecting knowledge and meaning across contexts.



Methodologically, funds of knowledge work is part of a movement toward more participatory research methods in both anthropology and education. While teachers have long engaged in teacher-research, this has conventionally taken the form of studying their classrooms and eventually modifying their own pedagogy; researching in the community was left to the sociologists and anthropologists. Funds of knowledge work extends the tools of anthropological methods for teachers to study their students' communities. Such an orientation contests traditional perceptions about who is equipped to conduct research (anthropologists) and what counts as a legitimate source of knowledge (classroom academic content). Instead, disenfranchised families become sources of knowledge for educators to draw on in their teaching. The same people who are most often (implicitly or explicitly) characterized by school practices as deficient instead serve as teachers, educating their children's educators about the breadth of their knowledge and experiences. The approach inherently questions the notion of what is viewed as normative, and it helps educators understand the actions and histories of community members as strategic efforts to navigate economic, social, and geographical constraints and advantages. Such a model of interaction reflects the priorities of community literacy scholarship as it seeks to disrupt assumptions about which literacies are valid and valuable.

This approach is possible partly because of a strong foundation in ethnographic research methods. Norma González's discussion of the "hybridity" of funds of knowledge clearly outlines how the static nature of concepts of "culture" render it unproductive for understanding peoples' actions and the value of their literacies. Funds of knowledge work relies on "processual approaches," which focus on "the processes of everyday life, in the form of daily activities, for a frame of reference" (41). Focusing on peoples' lived social practices allows researchers to understand "how others make sense of their lives" (9).

Funds of knowledge work also draws on a sociocultural perspective of learning: specifically, that knowledge is constructed in social contexts through collaborative negotiation of meaning. This allows teachers to become learners, students and their families to bring knowledge into the classroom, and all participates to engage in collaborative inquiry to construct meaning and understanding. Such methods intend to change the tenor of relationships between people embedded in social power—through education or any other institutional affiliation—and those most often alienated from those institutions.

This work was not originally articulated as action research in the political sense, nor have the authors relied on social justice as a justification for their methodology. But the book does detail the arrays of approaches that educators and practitioners can use to invigorate their understanding of the social resources their students have from the beginning. Given current political trends toward standardization and the deprofessionalization of educators, investing teachers with the authority to conduct research and construct social knowledge marks a political stance. Furthermore, current educational policies accept the notion of cultural deficits as the best explanation for differential educational and professional attainment among low-income people and the ethnically marginalized. González argues that a deficit-based attitude toward students grows from broader deficit-based attitudes toward people in general (34). Given the shifting of social roles and investments of authority that is inherent in funds of knowledge work, this book provides a tested model of participatory research that effectively expands conceptions of socially valuable literacy practices, as well as the authority to define them.