Anthropology and Education Conference Abstract

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Anthropology and Education in the Workplace: Understanding Latino Immigrant Experiences in Koreatown, New York City

While educators and education policy makers focus on the teaching of English to Latino immigrants, outside of schools Latinos are doing their own linguistic work /language learning without structured language curricula or standardized exams to evaluate their performance. The underground system of undocumented labor in the United States requires adult Latino immigrants to develop their own strategies to overcome various challenges, which anthropologists of education are well-positioned to investigate and reflect on because education is sociocultural process that happens in many contexts beyond schooling and across the lifespan. In Koreatown, NYC, for example, multilingual workplace environments create communication barriers for Latinos as they try to gain the respect of employers and coworkers, complete work tasks efficiently, fight for fair pay and hours, and develop friendships and even romantic relationships. No schools or formal institutions of education can teach or prepare these immigrants the rules or guidelines for surviving the demanding labor market, where they spend 60-70 hours a week interacting with new cultures, languages, food customs, etc. Therefore, this paper will explore the workplace and other community settings as educative places where people learn much more than how to perform mundane or repetitive tasks for low wages. It will also explore how this perspective has its roots in the anthropology of education, (Mead, Spindler, Varenne, McDermott, and others) and the work of philosophers and historians (Dewey, Cremin) who have argued that humans educate each other all the time and that experience itself is pedagogical. Data to be discussed in the paper include recorded conversations, mixed-language vocabulary lists, glossaries developed by workers, interviews, and participant observation. This research may have implications on how scholars of language and culture understand "undocumented" and low-paid service-sector workers, who are often labeled as "uneducated" or "unskilled" members of society.