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Tatyana Kleyn

The City College of New York, CUNY

Kate Seltzer

Rowan University

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Top Ten Lessons Learned from Ofelia García: Researching, Teaching and Living from the Heart

Cover Page Footnote

Tatyana Kleyn, EdD, is Associate Professor and Program Director in the Bilingual Education and TESOL Programs at The City College of New York. She received an EdD at Teachers College, Columbia University. Tatyana served as president of the New York State Association for Bilingual Education and was a Fulbright Scholar in Oaxaca, Mexico. Tatyana is co-editor of *Translanguaging with Multilingual Students: Learning from Classroom Moments* (with García) and co-author of *Teaching in Two Languages: A Guide for K-12 Bilingual Educators* (with Reyes). Tatyana produced and directed the *Living Undocumented Series* and *Una Vida, Dos Países: Children and Youth (Back) in Mexico* documentaries.

Kate Seltzer, PhD, is Assistant Professor of Education in the College of Education at Rowan University, New Jersey, whose research interests are education for bilingualism, English Language Arts education, and translanguaging. A former high school English teacher in New York City, Dr. Seltzer currently teaches pre- and in-service teachers of bi-/multilingual students. She is co-author of the recent book, *The Translanguaging Classroom: Leveraging Student Bilingualism for Learning* with Ofelia García and Susana Ibarra Johnson, and *Translanguaging: A CUNY-NYSIEB Guide for Educators* with Christina Celic, as well as several other publications on translanguaging in schools. Her current research focuses on expanding traditionally English-medium spaces to include the diverse language practices of all students, those considered bi-/multilingual and those traditionally seen as monolingual.

Top Ten Lessons Learned from Ofelia García: Researching, Teaching, and Living from the Heart

Tatyana Kleyn

The City College of New York, CUNY

Kate Seltzer

Rowan University

For nearly forty years, the work of Ofelia García has steered not only the field of bilingual education, but also Spanish language education, teaching English to speakers of other languages, and sociolinguistics. As our professor, mentor, colleague, and friend, Dr. García has taught us many powerful lessons. Here, we describe ten of these, including some pertaining to academic and theoretical contributions, as well as some related to advocacy work in multilingualism. We conclude by describing the impact she has had on diverse academic fields through the CUNY-NYSIEB research project, in which she has mobilized her passions to promote educational equity and justice.

Keywords: academic & theoretical contributions, bilingual education, educational equity and justice, multilingualism, Ofelia García, researching, teaching, and living from the heart, top ten lessons

For nearly forty years, the work of Ofelia García has steered not only the field of bilingual education, but also Spanish language education, teaching English to speakers of other languages and sociolinguistics. Her articles, chapters, books, reports, and talks throughout the world – which number in the hundreds – have left an imprint on researchers, educators, and ultimately, bilingual students across the globe.

García's body of work, as well as her role as our professor, mentor, colleague, and friend, have taught us many powerful lessons. This reflective essay details but a few of these, from her academic and theoretical contributions to her ability to bring forth her students' voices to her unwavering advocacy for centering the lives of bilingual people. It is telling that the lessons that have been the most meaningful to us span the professional and the personal, as these two elements of her life are inextricable.

In what follows, we describe ten lessons to motivate readers to live an academic and personal life that is purposeful in mission, powerful in changing mindsets, and passionate because it is a life driven from the heart. We conclude this piece by describing the impact she has had on numerous academic fields through the CUNY-

NYSIEB (The City University of New York – New York State Initiative on Emergent Bilinguals) research project. This project illustrates the most important lesson of all: the importance of mobilizing one’s passions in order to promote educational equity and justice.

Lesson 1: Never Stop Pushing Yourself and Your Field Forward

Reading through the extensive work of Ofelia García, we noticed common topics and themes across her research, with a constant evolution of ideas. This ability to remain true to the heart of her work *and to shift* in response to new information has shown us that even if we believe in something deeply, we must still strive to respond to changes in the world, so that our work *lives*. Her understandings continue to move scholarship about bilingualism and bilingual education forward.

An early example from García’s research demonstrates this flexibility and openness to challenging herself and ideas within the field. With her husband, she did an ethnographic study of schools attended by children of Cuban immigrants in Dade County, Florida (García & Otheguy, 1988). The questions that informed the inquiry were those that were being debated in the field of bilingual education in the US at the time, such as “Should schools maintain and develop Spanish?” and “How much instruction in English as a second language should students receive and when should it stop?” (p. 94). After spending time in the schools, these researchers realized that their framing of the study was flawed. They wrote that the very questions that were at the heart of the current conversations around bilingual education were “completely useless and inapplicable” (p. 97). In fact, they discovered the fluid use of both English and Spanish in these schools was “the only conceivable way of educating language minority children in a language majority environment” (p. 98).

They saw that the flaw in their study was a problem in the field at large: the questions being asked were, simply, the wrong questions. The questions were frameworks informed by a monoglossic mindset that failed to center the lived realities and language practices of bilingual speakers, and thus could not shed light on what they observed in the Dade County schools. Thus, in her work, Dr. García asks *new* questions that have contributed to the “multilingual turn” (May, 2015, p. 1). She also challenges well-established constructs such as code switching (Weinreich, 1953), interdependence hypothesis (Cummins, 1979) and the hyper-policing of languages in bilingual education (Creese & Blackledge, 2011). Her scholarship is a model of how to evolve; with the urgency that exists in our current political climate, moving forward is the *only* option.

Lesson 2: When Something Does Not Make Sense, Reframe It

Across her long career, García’s theoretical contributions have shifted educational research and practices from an external, nation-state perspective of named languages - i.e. those that are socially and politically recognized as English, Spanish, and Urdu - towards valuing the unique linguistic repertoires of people that transcend named language categories. This is in stark contrast to previous thinking in fields like applied linguistics, language education, and TESOL that centers monolinguals and monolingualism as the norm, while positioning bilinguals in the periphery (Taylor & Snoddon, 2013; García & Li Wei, 2014). This earlier approach contributed to the

implied separation of language systems in bilinguals, as opposed to viewing them as having one system with numerous features. This separation of languages in individuals and in schools did not make sense for the linguistic realities of bilingual people, thereby informing her most prominent work around translanguaging.

While Cen Williams (as cited in Baker, 2001) coined the term translanguaging, Dr. García, with her colleagues, (García, 2009; García, Johnson, & Seltzer, 2017; García & Kleyn, 2016; García & Wei, 2014;) has led the field in extending this idea to both the US and international contexts (for example, Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Pennycook, 2010; Li Wei, 2011). Her work has provided a theoretical basis to understand a common phenomenon that takes place in the homes, schools, and communities of those with diverse linguistic practices. Translanguaging theory has given educators permission to start from the language practices of students, rather than from rigid monoglossic ideologies that have informed policies of states and schools. This approach counters English only laws in over twenty states across the US, English only curriculum, and bans on bilingual education. This theory has also provided the vocabulary with which to talk about (and plan for) what educators have anecdotally told us on numerous occasions were *already doing* and inherently knew made sense for their bilingual students, that is, the use of all the linguistic resources available for teaching and learning.

Lesson 3: Start from the Students, Not from the “Models”

One of Ofelia García’s constant refrains is that teaching and research must be developed from the students up. We have taken this to mean that our work - from our teaching, to our scholarship, to our activism - must start from the actual language practices and lived experiences of bilingual people, rather than from top-down labels or program models. This epistemology has been, at times, met with resistance, and she and those of us whose work has been influenced by hers have faced critique and push-back for questioning what Kachru (1996, p. 140) has referred to as “sacred cows” in linguistic and educational research.

One such sacred cow is the very premise of models in bilingual education. García has been critical of models that, in their attempt to ensure that students master a dominant form of English, or to protect the language other than English, advocate the separation of students’ language practices. The ideology of “models” upholds what Jim Cummins (2008, p. 223) has called the “two solitudes” with the home and new languages being strictly separated. Most models are based on the idea that “accepting the fluid language practices of bilinguals will in some way weaken the non-dominant language” (Li Wei & García, 2016, p. 11). Instead of attempting to separate students’ languages into bounded categories like first and second languages, García has argued for a focus on the *features* of bilingual education rather than its *models*. Specifically, these features that warrant attention “must then be dynamic [and] conforming to the existing practices in the community, rather than have the children and communities conform to pre-established notions of what constitutes the two or more languages (García & Lin, 2016, p. 17). By envisioning bilingual education as a flexible, adaptable approach grounded in the language practices of students themselves, the goal becomes “the empowerment of bilinguals to use their entire language repertoire in different

situations for added criticality and creativity,” rather than “bilingualism in two standard languages, as defined by state and educational authorities” (p. 17).

Lesson 4: Keep the “Bilingual” in Bilingual Education

Ofelia García has always featured bilingualism prominently in her work and her life, in spite of political efforts to erase it. From re-framing how students are identified as *emergent bilinguals* (García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008) to reminding us that dual language programs are really dual language *bilingual* programs (García, Velasco, Menken, & Vogel, in press) to recasting bilingualism from a “double monolingualism” to a dynamic bilingualism (García, 2009), she has continued to proudly use the “B word” in her scholarship. As she does this, she constantly refers back to the field’s historical roots in the activism of Latino communities, as she did in the *Journal of Multilingual Education Research* (JMER) inaugural issue, with a focus on the evolution of bilingual education in New York City (García, 2010).

Another area where Dr. García actions have centered bilingualism is at The City College of New York (CCNY), where she held her first tenure track position (and met her husband, Ricardo). The program that was originally called Bilingual Education has now expanded to be the Bilingual Education **and** TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) Programs, and we have both been fortunate to work there, the second author as an adjunct faculty member and the first author as a faculty member and program director. We take pride in her decision – in collaboration with her CCNY colleagues - to bring together these two fields, so often separated in many schools of education, in the program’s name and philosophy. When she made this choice, it was revolutionary and continues to be an exception, in spite of the fact that both fields support emergent bilingual students in becoming bilingual. This integrated vision of teacher education in the fields of Bilingual and TESOL education is just one more way that she has kept bilingualism in the education of bilingual people, no matter the organizational structure of the program.

Lesson 5: Always Keep One Foot in the Classroom

One of the most important ways that Ofelia García keeps students as the starting point for her research is by staying close to the daily realities of schools and classrooms. Her extensive travels, within the US and internationally, have included visits to many different types of classrooms, and each has shaped her understanding of bilingualism and bilingual education. To be a colleague or a student of Dr. García is to be privy to stories from her travels that reveal how her experiences in schools have contributed to her broad conceptualization of what it means to educate bilingually.

One such story that particularly moved us revolves around a conversation she had with Antonio, a young bilingual fifth grader in New York. She was sitting with Antonio in his classroom, when he explained to her, “Even though Spanish runs through my heart, English rules my veins.” This interaction with a child brought together her developing understanding of languaging and how schooling must be more responsive to the lived experiences of bilinguals.

As she later observed, “Clearly it is English that rules, but Spanish is what keeps life going, the motor that pumps the English. Without either, life for these bilingual

students would stop” (García, 2014, p. 111). She has used this story not only to illustrate the dynamism of bilingualism, but also to illustrate the importance of keeping one foot in the classroom at all times. Without a physical connection to the classroom, we would miss the lessons that students like Antonio can offer us. It is his voice, and the voices of many other students and teachers, that have shaped her ideas about bilingualism and bilingual education.

Lesson 6: Be a Co-learner and Role Model through Collaboration

Ofelia García is, to use one of her own terms (García & Li Wei, 2014), a co-learner, whose willingness to be open about the research process dissolves the hierarchies so often embedded in academic relationships. Kate Seltzer remembers her first year of doctoral work, when, as her student and research assistant, she was asked to read early versions of García’s articles. Though at first it was nerve wracking to provide feedback to such an influential and respected scholar, she communicated that Seltzer’s input was genuinely important to the work. Reading García’s work simultaneously broadened Kate Seltzer’s knowledge of the field and expanded her understanding of the research process.

Just looking at Ofelia García long list of publications one can see her commitment to collaboration; in addition to her impressive list of individually-written books, articles, and chapters, are dozens of co-authored pieces, many of which were written with current and former students. For those of us who have been fortunate to write with her, it has been an invaluable intellectual and professional experience. Despite her position as a leader in the field, the co-authored publications, even with her graduate students, are true collaborations.

For instance, when Tatyana Kleyn co-edited “Translanguaging with Multilingual Learners” with Ofelia García (García & Kleyn, 2016) it was a true collaboration in every way. Dr. García, as a senior scholar, did not only contribute via the big ideas, but also worked diligently on smaller aspects of publication such as references and the index. Kleyn always appreciated how Ofelia García was open to her ideas and valued her contributions. This collaboration not only resulted in a published manuscript, but also a lesson for Tatyana Kleyn in how to collaborate with colleagues and students.

Lesson 7: Teach through Listening, Supporting, and Prioritizing Students

Perhaps one the most powerful lessons we have learned from Ofelia García revolves around her teaching and her mentorship. To be a student in her classes is to be in constant dialogue, with the material, with fellow students, and most excitingly, with Ofelia García herself. In her thoughtfully-designed, provocative courses, she rarely lectures, choosing instead to listen and facilitate her students’ exploration of the content and ideas. A strong believer in the Collaborative Descriptive Review process, an inquiry-based approach developed by Pat Carini and the Prospect Center for Education and Research (Carini, 2000), she organizes each session of her courses around her students’ voices. Always sitting in a circle, students share their impressions, questions, and connections to the material, building on one another’s comments, shedding light on moments of confusion or misconception, and collaboratively

constructing a shared understanding of the content. As her students speak, she takes detailed notes, asking thoughtful questions and, as she puts it, “pulling the threads” from the discussion. It is here that she provides her insight and expertise, as well as a glimpse of the bigger picture. Her students leave her classroom with more knowledge and a sense that they are part of a larger, ongoing scholarly conversation.

Being Ofelia García’s student means always having someone on your team, even as she urges you to dig deeper, think more critically, and – as she puts it – to “push” and destabilize status quo notions of languaging and education. Despite her being in demand to speak at events across the globe, she makes sure her teaching and students are prioritized. With a full teaching load and a large number of advisees, Ofelia García always makes time to meet with her students, both at The Graduate Center and at her home, and to read drafts of their work. Her feedback is never generic or cursory; it is always clear that she has read and truly thought about their work and ideas. After meetings with her, we have felt supported, centered and more clear-headed about the story we want our work to tell. Dr. Kate Seltzer will always remember being invited to her home to discuss the first draft of her doctoral dissertation. Ofelia García had read the entire manuscript and provided invaluable feedback (and a delicious meal!), conveying in both her words and through her actions that Seltzer’s work was worthy of her – and the field’s – time and attention.

Lesson 8: The Personal Informs the Professional

Ofelia García’s readers and audience always find that her scholarship is highly personal. In fact, the two are intertwined and dialogic. To know her work is to know her life, and to know her life is to better understand her work. Her own history is the earliest source of her passion for bilingual education, and we see glimpses of that history and of the diverse experiences of her life in her conceptualizations of bilingualism. For example, a fairly recent publication (Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015) draws on an anecdote from Dr. Otheguy and Dr. García’s personal lives as a way of clarifying the complex concept of “named languages.” The story, which centers on serving home cooked meals to a guest who was visiting them from Japan, offers an accessible and tangible way of deconstructing the myth of “named languages.” In the story, she prepares four different meals, and she does not plan them with the intention of adhering strictly to the cuisine of any single nation. The visitor has no basis for knowing if an individual meal is American, Cuban, or a combination of the two. Nor does it matter, because the meals are all well-constructed and delicious, regardless of whether they can be described with an external label that is particular to a specific place. This engaging window into Ofelia García’s life clearly demonstrates her and her co-authors’ central point – that “like a named national cuisine, a named language is defined by the social, political, or ethnic affiliation of its speakers” (p. 286). The anecdote also demonstrates the intersections of the personal with the intellectual and scholarly realms of her life. In short, she *lives the work*, keeping it in her heart and always start from there.

Lesson 9: Live a Full Life

We have learned from Ofelia García to live and enjoy a full life and to approach the people we work with as *whole* people whose lives and commitments outside of the

work are paramount. Though she is the hardest working person we know, she is never too busy to ask us about our lives outside of our work, nor to share elements of her personal life with us. Her stories about her family and friends are constant reminders that our time and energy must be spent both in our work *and* in our personal relationships and lives. Like her, we must take the time to help plan our children's weddings, care for sick friends, travel with our partners, and babysit our grandchildren. As she likes to say, "the work will always be there."

Lesson 10: Mobilize your Passions

We conclude with a lesson that brings together all the other lessons described here, which shows Ofelia García's indelible impact on the education of emergent bilinguals. In 2011, García, along with Kate Menken and Ricardo Otheguy, conceptualized CUNY-NYSIEB. This major project aims to "improve the educational outcomes for emergent bilinguals" (<http://www.cuny-nysieb.org/our-vision/>), through a multipronged and long-term approach to working with participating schools across New York State through seminars, school visits, classroom coaching/modeling, and the development of resources to support schools. With the understanding that schools must center the needs of their bilingual students, there are two non-negotiable principles that guide the work: (1) Bilingualism is a resource; and (2) the ecology of schools must reflect the multilingualism of their families. Beyond these two areas, schools are free to create structures and approaches that best serve their emergent bilingual population.

CUNY-NYSIEB is a unique collaboration between faculty, primarily from CUNY, but also from SUNY (State University of New York) and other New York universities; doctoral students from the Urban Education program at the CUNY Graduate Center; and K-12 school leaders from across New York. These entities often work in their own silos, and it takes a concerted effort to bring these groups together with one common purpose. Through this multi-layered collaboration, Ofelia García and the larger team have been able to apprentice school leaders and educators to understand translanguaging theory and then turn it into a stance, practice, and prominent aspect of school culture (see García & Kleyn, 2016). Beyond impacting schools directly, the idea to bring together university faculty and doctoral students, many of whom will be future faculty, has also influenced the preparation of thousands of pre- and in-service teachers of emergent bilinguals in New York. Additionally, this project has created bridges and bonds with faculty members across CUNY and SUNY institutions, who too often work independently of one another, fostering a collaborative community of bilingual educators, and ultimately *la familia* [the family] of CUNY-NYSIEB.

The work of CUNY-NYSIEB, under the leadership of Project Director Maite Sánchez (preceded by Nelson Flores and succeeded by Kate Seltzer) has created local, national, and international ripples that will surely live beyond its time. The project's website (<http://www.cuny-nysieb.org/>) allows free access to numerous guides on translanguaging, bilingual literature, curriculum development, and unique student populations. Videos show educators in dialogue with Ofelia García as she and other educators and researchers discuss the theory of translanguaging in different contexts. As we have learned at various international conferences as well as with teachers and

teacher educators, this treasure trove of resources has been used by educators from around the world. It truly illustrates the impact that she has had not only through her research, but also through genuine ways of caring and connecting that undergird everything she touches.

Conclusion

We have had the honor to work with Ofelia García, and in this reflective piece we have highlighted only some of the important lessons we have learned from her. Her impact on our lives as researchers, teachers, and human beings is immense, and, as this special issue of *JMER* attests, we know we are not alone. Everyone she has worked with has stories about her enormous intellect, curiosity, humor, and warmth. The lessons we have learned from Dr. García, including her constant call to place bilingual students at the center of research and teaching, and her ability to connect and care for her students and colleagues, will stay with us and remind us, as we continue along our own personal and professional paths, to always do so from the heart.

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