Imagined Communities and Educational Possibilities: Introduction

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Imagined communities refer to groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination. In our daily lives we interact with many communities whose existence can be felt concretely and directly. These include our neighborhood communities, our workplaces, our educational institutions, and our religious groups. However, these are not the only communities with which we are affiliated. As Etienne Wenger (1998) suggests, direct involvement with community practices and investment in tangible and concrete relationships—what he calls *engagement*—is not the only way in which we belong to a community. For Wenger, *imagination*—"a process of expanding oneself by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves" (p. 176)—is another important source of community.

Imagined ties extend both spatially and temporally. Benedict Anderson (1991), who first coined the term *imagined communities,* argues that what we think of as nations are imagined communities, "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (p. 6). Thus, in imagining ourselves bonded with our fellow compatriots across space and time, we can feel a sense of community with people we have not yet met, but perhaps hope to meet one day. For example, when a young Japanese man studying fashion design in Tokyo starts to learn English, he may envision himself as one of the most

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successful fashion designers in New York. In his imagination, he is a recognized member of an international fashion community, and English is seen as one of the important means of gaining this future affiliation.

This notion of imagined communities inspired Bonny Norton's recent work on nonparticipation in second language (L2) classrooms (Norton, 2000, 2001). The purpose of this special issue is to investigate further how the notion of imagined communities might enhance our understanding of language learning and identity. We hope to demonstrate how the concept of *imagined communities* can elucidate issues concerning language, identity, and education that have been recognized as important but for which we have limited research evidence. Lave and Wenger (1991; Wenger, 1998), to whom we owe much inspiration, contend that learning is not just a cognitive process of acquiring a set of skills and knowledge, but is part of changing participation patterns in various communities with shared practices. As learners become more adept at community practices, they increase their responsibility in the community and become more active participants. For the past several years, this *situated learning* perspective has been gaining ground in the field of education (J. R. Anderson, Greeno, Reder, & Simon, 2000; J. R. Anderson, Reder, & Simon, 1996, 1997; Cobb & Bowers, 1999; Greeno, 1997) and in applied linguistics (Belcher, 1994; Casanave, 1998, 2002; Toohey, 1998, 2000).

However, Lave and Wenger (1991) speak most of the learning that takes place as a result of individuals' engagement in immediately accessible communities—that is, communities *of practice,* such as groups of midwives, tailors, and nondrinking alcoholics. Their involvement is direct, their relationships concrete. What we wish to accomplish in this special issue is to extend their notion of learning and examine how learners' affiliation with imagined communities might affect their learning trajectories. Such communities include future relationships that exist only in the learner's imagination as well as affiliations—such as nationhood or even transnational communities—that extend beyond local sets of relationships. We suggest that these imagined communities are no less real than the ones in which learners have daily engagement and might even have a stronger impact on their current actions and investment. Two examples follow that may help to render our vision more concrete.

KATARINA AND HER IMAGINED PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY

Norton (2000, 2001) describes two adult language learners in Canada who resisted participation in their English as a second language (ESL) classes. One of these learners was Katarina, originally from Poland, who immigrated to Canada as an adult. When she expressed her wish to take a computer course, her ESL teacher discouraged her, saying that her English was not "good enough" to take the course. Greatly insulted, Katarina never returned to the ESL class.

On preliminary analysis, Katarina's reaction might appear extreme and counterproductive. However, Norton argues that if we consider Katarina's investment in her imagined community, which was a community of professionals, her reaction takes on greater significance. Katarina had been a veteran teacher in Poland, and although she could not find employment as a teacher in Canada, she continued to view herself as having legitimate claim to professional status. When her ESL teacher discouraged her from taking a computer course, Katarina felt that she was positioned as a "mere" immigrant and that she was being denied an important opportunity to gain greater access to her imagined community of professionals. In short, her nonparticipation in the ESL class resulted from a disjuncture between her imagined community and the teacher's educational vision.

RUI AND HIS IMAGINED, IDEALIZED JAPAN

In a study of long-term changes in bilingual students' identities, Kanno (2000, 2003) relates the story of Rui, a Japanese teenager who spent two thirds of his life in English-speaking countries (Australia and Canada). Although in terms of his values and ways of thinking he had more in common with Canadian teenagers than Japanese ones, he firmly believed that he was Japanese. To keep his Japaneseness and to be recognized as Japanese, he made every effort to maintain his Japanese language proficiency.

In Rui's determined identification with Japan, however, his "Japan" was an imagined construct that had little resemblance to the "real" Japan that he was later to experience when he returned to the country. As B. Anderson (1991) suggests, a nation is an imagined community to everyone. But to Rui it was doubly so, because away from home for so long, he had little experiential knowledge of Japan on which to build his allegiance. What he lacked in substantive knowledge, he compensated for with his powerful imagination. When he finally discovered that the "real" Japan was far removed from his idealized Japan, his disappointment was acute and led him to declare that he did not want to be Japanese anymore. But while it lasted, Rui's private, imagined community created a powerful vision, giving him an important sense of direction.

These two short examples illustrate some of the characteristics of the relationship among imagined communities, learner identities, and language learning. We can see, for example, that for both Katarina and Rui, their imagined communities were visions of a very private nature. These communities did not in fact exist—not yet or not at all—and did not accord well with the realities encountered in their daily lives. Yet these images profoundly affected the learners' investment in the target language and their concomitant actions and learning trajectories. In Rui's case, his identification with the imagined Japan provided a strong impetus for first language maintenance; in Katarina's case, it led to her withdrawal from her ESL class and

her enrollment in an alternative course that would provide greater scope for her imagined identity. The important point is that their investment in the target language, be it Japanese or English, can be best understood in the context of future affiliations and identifications, rather than prevailing sets of relationships.

Another intriguing aspect of imagined communities illustrated by these two cases is that imagination should not be equated with fantasy or withdrawal from reality. Simon (1992), for example, draws a distinction between "wishes," in which there is no possibility of action, and the "hopeful imagination," which informs the struggle for a better future. As he argues, "Hope is constituted in the need to imagine an alternative human world and to imagine it in a way that enables one to act in the present as if this alternative had already begun to emerge" (p. 4). Katarina's and Rui's cases provide compelling examples of the ways in which the "hopeful imagination" informs particular actions and initiatives. Further, imagined communities, like all communities, have defining sets of "rules and regulations." Vygotsky (1978), who argued that imagination plays a crucial role in preschool-age children's psychological development, points out that imagination is rule-based: "The notion that a child can behave in an imaginary situation without rules is simply inaccurate. If the child is playing the role of a mother, then she has rules of maternal behavior" (p. 95). And so it remains in the imagination of adults. Both Rui and Katarina's imagined communities have requirements for participation, which specify what they have to accomplish to gain access to these communities. Thus, Rui recognizes that command of Japanese is important for access to Japanese society and strives to maintain the language. Katarina recognizes that an intellectually challenging course will help her to gain access to a professional community, and therefore seeks out a computer course. It is precisely because of the rule-based nature of imagined communities that they have a powerful impact on the learners' educational goals.

SIX STUDIES

Most of the contributors to this special issue participated in a well-received American Association for Applied Linguistics colloquium in St. Louis, Missouri, in February 2001, titled *Multilingualism and Language Education: Imagined Communities and Everyday Realities.* Because of the success of this colloquium, we considered the possibility of incorporating diverse contributions into a special issue of the *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education.* Building inter alia on B. Anderson, Wenger, Vygotsky, and Norton, the authors in this special issue further expand on imagined communities as part of the analytical framework for their work.

Perspectives and theories that student teachers encounter in their teaching education programs have a profound impact on their future teacher identity and pedagogy. Aneta Pavlenko analyzes the language learning and teaching narratives of graduate students enrolled in a MATESOL program. Their essays show that exposure to con-

temporary theories of bilingualism and debates on the native/nonnative speaker dichotomy opened up the possibility of seeing themselves and their future students as members of the community of multicompetent L2 users rather than that of nonnative speakers.

French immersion in Canada has traditionally catered to culturally and linguistically dominant, English-speaking students. Focusing on the growing number of immigrant parents who enroll their children in French immersion programs, Diane Dagenais investigates what motivates the parents' choice. Extensive interviews with parents of Asian background suggest that they are preparing their children not only for the competitive Canadian job market but also for membership in imagined multilingual, transnational communities.

Multilingualism and globalization are also changing educational priorities in Japan. Yasuko Kanno examines the policies and practices of four schools in Japan that serve various bilingual groups—from the extremely privileged to the extremely underprivileged. Kanno argues that these schools envision particular future trajectories for their students and that these visions frame their current policies and practices. Because the students at the four schools are expected to join very different imagined communities, they are being prepared for different kinds of bilingualism.

Bonny Norton and Farah Kamal investigate the experiences of Pakistani middle-school students involved in a global community education project. Asked to create a local plan of action that addresses a larger social issue, the Pakistani students sought to promote the literacy and English skills of a group of Afghan refugee children. The students imagined Pakistan in the future as a contributing member of the international community, in which literacy, competence in English, and technological progress were integral to development and peaceful coexistence.

Sandra Silberstein draws on B. Anderson's notion of imagined communities to examine media coverage of the O. J. Simpson case. She demonstrates how, as the case progressed, the media transformed Simpson from the race-neutral American hero to the racialized criminal. This transformation, she suggests, reflects deep contradictions in American culture: America as a land of opportunity for everyone, and America as a racially divided society. Silberstein calls for a complex, nuanced treatment of culture in language classrooms that questions monolithic and stereotypical notions of the target culture.

Using critical discourse analysis, Adrian Blackledge examines covert racism in the educational discourse of school inspection reports in England. These reports criticize ethnic minority families' lengthy visits to their heritage country, arguing that such visits result in their children's prolonged absence from "British" schooling. Blackledge points out that although such arguments are based on the racist assumption that "mainstream" education is more important than education in the children's ethnic heritage, the more authoritative the discriminatory discourse, the more commonsense and natural it appears.

POSSIBLE IDENTITIES, TRANSNATIONAL TIES, AND
IDEOLOGICAL CONSTRAINTS

Although the respective authors' conceptualizations of imagined communities differ from one another and topics vary widely, some common themes do emerge, to which we draw the reader's attention.

First of all, imagined communities expand our range of possible selves. As Norton (2001) argues, "A learner's imagined community invite[s] an imagined identity, and a learner's investment in the target language must be understood within this context" (p. 166). To envision an imagined identity within the context of an imagined community can impact a learner's engagement with educational practices. On the one hand, it may compel learners to seek certain kinds of educational opportunities they might otherwise not seek. This is illustrated by Dagenais' example of immigrant parents choosing French immersion programs for their children, as well as Kanno's case studies of schools familiarizing their students with certain cultural practices. On the other hand, imagined identities can reframe the learning experience of a given student. Wenger (1998) speaks of two stonecutters who were asked what they were doing. One answered, "I am cutting this stone in a perfectly square shape," and the other responded, "I am building a cathedral" (p. 176). The difference in their imagined relationship to their work and the world will have a profound effect on their ongoing learning. Similarly, as Pavlenko demonstrates, whether nonnative-speaking student teachers of ESL think of themselves as peripheral members of the TESOL community because of their nonnativeness, or as legitimate, multicompetent members of a larger imagined community, is likely to affect how they engage with learning opportunities in the classroom.

Second, technological advances in the last two decades have had a significant impact on what is possible to imagine, and this theme is reflected in virtually all of the studies in this issue. Noting that imagination has always played an important role in social life, Appadurai (1996) argues that what is different about our imagination today is that it is mediated by two new developments: communication technology and mass migration. The influence of the rapid development of global communication systems on the scope of imaginable communities is indisputable. B. Anderson (1991), for example, argues persuasively that print capitalism, by standardizing print languages and linking speakers of the same languages, contributed to the emergence of nationalism. In a similar way, the Internet and the media make connections among people thousands of miles apart. The "virtual" participation of millions of Americans in the O. J. Simpson saga, which Silberstein documents, is an imagination mediated by television and the media. Similarly, Pakistani children in Norton and Kamal's study can envision the future of their country in relation to others because they have a means of extending their imagination beyond the borders of their country.

As well, mass migration promotes transnational ties. Appadurai (1996) writes, "More people than ever before seem to imagine routinely the possibility that they or their children will live and work in places other than where they were born" (p. 6). Community traditionally depended on territory. However, McMillan and Chavis (1986) argue that community can exist independent of territorial context as long as four elements are present: (a) membership, (b) the community's influence on members and vice versa, (c) reinforcement of the individual's identity by community membership, and (d) shared affective connections. Advances in communication and transportation technology has promoted the development of a sense of community independent of a particular locale (Almgren, 2000), and such changes in imagined communities are reflected in many of the studies in this issue.

Third, imagination at even the most personal level is nonetheless related to social ideologies and hegemonies. One could argue that it is precisely because of their relatively privileged position that the immigrant families in Dagenais' study can prepare their children for future global participation and that the Pakistani children in Norton and Kamal's study can concern themselves with larger social issues. Although the refugees in the Pakistani study would have welcomed a different future, they faced almost insurmountable social and economic constraints. Societal constraints on an individual's capacity to imagine a different future come out even more explicitly in Kanno's and Blackledge's studies. Kanno's research demonstrates how processes of social stratification socialize the least privileged children into the most impoverished imagined communities, while those with more symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991), such as Japanese children from socially dominant communities, are granted a more cosmopolitan vision of Japan. Similarly, in Blackledge's study, dominant understandings of what it means to be "British" frame the kinds of imagined communities available to immigrant children: Ties to ethnic communities are discouraged because they are seen to be an impediment to minority students' socialization into an imagined monolingual British community. In both Kanno's and Blackledge's studies, it is paradoxical that the "monolingualizing tendencies" (Blackledge, 2002, p. 72) of the nation-state apply most strongly to the bottom rung of the country's socioeconomic hierarchy, where linguistic and cultural diversity is most extensive.

CONCLUSION

In this brief introduction, we examined the ways in which different authors, working in different scholarly and educational communities, conceptualized the notion of imagined communities. All these authors have demonstrated that humans are capable of connecting with communities that lie beyond the local and immediate and that investment in such imagined communities strongly influences identity construction and engagement in learning. We argued that a conception of imagined

communities enables us to enhance our understanding of learning on both temporal and spatial dimensions. On a temporal dimension, the notion of imagined communities enables us to relate learners' visions of the future to their prevailing actions and identities. It is a way of affirming that what has not yet happened in the future can be a reason and motivation for what learners do in the present. On a spatial dimension, we can examine the interaction between national ideologies and individual learners' identities on the one hand, and the influence of globalization and transnationalism on language learning and identity construction on the other.

What is ultimately most exciting for the authors in this special issue is that the notion of imagined communities provides a theoretical framework for the exploration of creativity, hope, and desire in identity construction. The diverse studies in this issue demonstrate convincingly that learners and teachers are capable of imagining the world as different from prevailing realities (Greene, 1995). Moreover, we can invest our time and energy to strive for the realization of alternative visions of the future. Our identities then must be understood not only in terms of our investment in the "real" world but also in terms of our investment in *possible* worlds. Research in this special issue suggests that investment in such imagined communities offers intriguing possibilities for social and educational change.

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