

## ***Breaking New Ground: Teaching Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education in U.S. Secondary Schools***

Andrea DeCapua and Helaine W. Marshall (2011).  
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**Imagine** arriving to the United States at 14 years old, coming from an agricultural village that places high value on immediately applicable knowledge for survival. This knowledge, often transmitted orally, allowed you to take up responsibility as part of a community whose needs came before your own. You are now in high school in the United States, where you are expected to think about abstract concepts and take individual responsibility for acquiring an education. Learning the new language and content is difficult, but you also struggle with an entirely new way of conceptualizing knowledge and feel completely alienated. This is just one example of the many different life histories of youth who make up a subgroup of English language learners (ELLs) that are referred to as students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE). SLIFE may have one or more of the following histories: (a) limited, interrupted, or no formal education due to conflict, migration, or economic obstacles; (b) little or no literacy skills in their home language(s); (c) little to no foundational and grade-level content knowledge; and (d) cultural values and understandings that often conflict with those of the U.S. education system (DeCapua, Smathers, & Tang, 2009).

Andrea DeCapua and Helaine W. Marshall's book *Breaking New Ground: Teaching Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education in U.S. Secondary Schools* extends earlier work by DeCapua, Smathers, and Tang (2009) by guiding U.S. secondary school teachers who teach SLIFE toward understanding and addressing the cultural inconsistencies between the U.S. education system and their students' backgrounds. In their book, DeCapua and Marshall introduce the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP), which operationalizes effective instruction to help dispel the dissonance and alienation of students, with the ultimate goal of transitioning them into recognizing and adapting to U.S. academic expectations. The authors assert that engaging with SLIFE requires not only attention to language and content but also, and imperatively, to culture. Thus, they have designed MALP as a culturally responsive pedagogy in the belief that SLIFE are too often mislabeled as failing or remedial; the authors address secondary school teachers in particular because SLIFE are at the highest risk of dropping out at that level. In support of this belief, their book contains three subcategories: theory and introduction to MALP (Chapters 1–3), implementation and examples of project-based learning within MALP (Chapters 4–7), and a culminating reflection (Chapter 8).

The first three chapters theorize culture, discuss the dissonance that arises between the cultures of SLIFE and that of the U.S. educational system, and introduce MALP. In Chapter 1, DeCapua and Marshall define culture as socially constructed elements in a community, some of which are visible (e.g., food,

holidays) and some of which are hidden (e.g., ways of teaching and learning, the importance of print resources). They argue, in fact, that most elements of culture are hidden, and they define and contrast key cultural concepts, such as collectivism vs. individualism, pragmatic vs. academic ways of thinking, and oral transmission vs. literacy. Chapter 2 brings the theory of culture described in the previous chapter into the specific context of schooling in the United States, which assumes learning to have abstract and future relevance that brings students toward independence.

The authors expand their explanation of MALP in Chapter 3 as a transitional instructional model based on the interconnectedness of language, learning, and meaning, and informed by culturally responsive pedagogy. They describe the three guiding principles of MALP: establishing and maintaining communication with students and parents, identifying the priorities of both the student and the teacher, and building associations between what is familiar to SLIFE and the academic knowledge to which they must transition. It is “mutually adaptive” because the model does not merely expect teachers to help SLIFE adapt to U.S. educational expectations. First, teachers take the responsibility of adapting to SLIFE conditions for learning. Once there, SLIFE and their teachers together work within both paradigms—that of the student and that of the U.S. system—before teachers help SLIFE adapt to U.S. expectations for learning. The descriptive chart provided in the description of MALP in Chapter 3 is helpful for teachers to visualize this mutual transition.

Bringing the theoretical conceptualization of culture to practice, Chapter 4 demonstrates how to implement MALP through content-based ESL instruction in social studies and math classes. Examples are thoroughly described with terminology learned in previous chapters, bridging earlier discussions on cultural dissonance with practical implementation of instruction. For example, the social studies scenario follows a teacher through a three-day lesson plan on the presidential election. While following the mandated curriculum, the teacher’s goal is to develop SLIFE’s academic ways of thinking, such as compare/contrast, in order to help them compartmentalize and remember the substantial amount of new information they are learning. The teacher introduces new vocabulary (e.g., state, population, Electoral College) and builds a background about the election process. She first adapts to meet SLIFE within the conditions for learning that they are used to; learning must have immediate relevance to their lives. She asks students if they have any connection to particular states in their personal lives—for example, maybe they first settled in Texas for six months before arriving in New York. She takes the time to look up the state’s website with the class, learn something new about it, and help students correlate the state population to the number of electoral votes each state receives. After doing this with three or four more states, she now has a chart of states, their populations, and their votes to show students. She then teaches SLIFE to use the internet to find information on two U.S. states in order to complete a task that is unfamiliar to them: a content-based activity in which students create and share a poster with information comparing and contrasting electoral votes in those two states. As SLIFE are accustomed to sharing responsibility for learning among others, the teacher adapts to the students by making this a pair-work activity. Together, students compare and contrast the two states: their electoral votes, populations, and other facts they choose to research. The final condition for learning that SLIFE are used to—oral instead of written transmission—is also attended to by the teacher because students present their pair-work together on a poster to their classmates. In this way, not only do SLIFE work within their conditions for learning, but also the teacher has had them be individually responsible for their own part of the pair-work and use written literacy skills to create their poster. Teachers can appreciate that MALP modifies, but does not replace, existing instructional models that join language and content in ELL classrooms, extending such models by linking an academic task objective (in this example, compare and contrast) to language and content.

Chapters 5–7 focus on a specific component of MALP: academic ways of thinking. The authors argue that this is the most critical component because it is the reason that many SLIFE ultimately fail to transition to success in the U.S. school system. Chapter 5 exemplifies content-based ESL instruction

realized through project-based learning, continuing the pattern of connecting MALP to methods of classroom instruction that teachers already use. Project-based learning—where students create something together during planned, sequenced tasks and activities that culminate in a final project—connects the values of immediate relevance, oral transmission, and interconnectedness from the backgrounds of SLIFE to an academic sequence of tasks that get learners to use print, assume some responsibility for individual accountability, and understand how each immediate task sets them up for future learning. Teachers who work with a mixed group of SLIFE that range in literacy and content understanding will find these examples practical because project-based learning easily accommodates students' differing abilities due to the nature of the task.

Chapter 6 provides several project-based learning examples that specifically target academic thinking. For example, one project, "mapping time," allows students practice with the academic thinking of "sequencing." SLIFE, who can come from cultures that have different rhythms of daily, weekly, and yearly activities, may celebrate their birthday as different from the day they were actually born, or not at all. Mapping a timeline of important events for SLIFE, for example, supports them in conceptualizing the expected chronological understanding of how time is perceived and used in the United States. Later in the year, teachers can adapt timeline activities to organize U.S. presidents, geologic eras, and more. Teachers will find useful that each project outlines academic objectives (e.g., sequencing, classifying, defining, evaluating) as well as language and content, scaffolds activities within the larger project, extends the project through time (e.g., a project could culminate after two weeks of different tasks that come together into a whole), and finally, relates the project to future lessons.

Chapter 7 takes teachers through one extensively described project-based lesson—a class survey—helping teachers visualize the whole timeline, from selecting a topic to completing the report. Structuring the chapter like this is useful because teachers can see how any of the steps can be adapted to the needs and abilities of specific students or groups. Even experienced teachers can be overwhelmed by the standards they must meet, the differing capabilities of students, and trying to implement a new project via the lens of a new model. The in-depth explanations, charts, and figures in MALP support teachers so they do not need to "reinvent the wheel." Instead, they can see an entire example of how to adapt, extend, and complement their teacher toolbox by connecting what they already do into a larger project that supports them in supporting SLIFE.

Teachers can appreciate that reflection is taken seriously in each chapter and further emphasized with a chapter of its own—Chapter 8: "Reflecting on MALP." Unlike authors bringing in some culturally responsive ideas that remain utopian in their theoretical claims but limited in practical implementation, DeCapua and Marshall demonstrate that they are well aware of the obstacles that face teachers who want to use MALP, including covering a mandated curriculum and preparing students for high-stakes testing. They are realistic in their goals for MALP and provide evidence of its success, complementing research-based practices that connect feasibly to mandates.

DeCapua and Marshall contribute to the literature on SLIFE by extending support past language, literacy, and content development (Montero, Newmaster, & Ledger, 2014; Woods, 2009) and toward filling a crucial gap in the education of SLIFE: the need to teach academic ways of thinking. DeCapua and Marshall's work promotes the need to empower SLIFE as Hos's (2016) does. Caring must have an ethical component—teachers must help students bridge their backgrounds with the new expectations of U.S. schools or they will not succeed. It is because of this imperative that not only secondary school teachers, but also administrators and primary school teachers who support SLIFE, will benefit from reading the book. There are a very small number of online resources for teachers searching for support for teaching SLIFE (see, e.g., Keppler, Morales, Cortada, & Austin, 2015; New York State Education Department, 2018; Robertson & Lafond, 2012), and DeCapua and Marshall's work joins the equally few practical books for teachers (see Custodio & O'Loughin, 2017; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). DeCapua and Marshall's book is a useful addition to these resources, as having potential as reading for teacher preparation

programs because of the abundance of questions and reflective tasks provided in each chapter, allowing teachers, both novice and experienced, time for thinking about and practicing how to bring MALP into their individual practices and understandings.

Although the SLIFE in-class part of the school day is thoroughly addressed in this book, the authors might consider addressing in future work how the school system as a whole—administrators, staff, parents, translators, and students—can better understand and contribute to the success of this understudied and misunderstood population. As DeCapua and Marshall note, where their culturally responsive teacher may not be present, SLIFE can spend substantial periods in the halls, at lunch breaks, and in mandated school activities feeling alienated. How can educators continue to expand MALP into these spaces in practical ways with realistic outcomes? Empowering teachers to advocate for SLIFE through what MALP can offer beyond the classroom walls could be an interesting and productive way forward from here.

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