Dora the Explorer: Behind the Scenes of a Social Phenomenon

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COMMENTARY

DORA THE EXPLORER

Behind the scenes of a social phenomenon

Mariana Diaz-Wionczek, Valeria Lovelace and **Carlos E. Cortés**

Let's be up front about it. We are not approaching *Dora the Explorer* as detached scholars. In fact, the three of us have been deeply involved with *Dora*: Mariana as Director of Research and Development; Valeria as Research and Curriculum Development Consultant; and Carlos as Creative and Cultural Advisor. We believe that it is our privileged position as 'Dora' insiders that helps us bring unique insights into this immensely popular preschool television series.

Dora the Explorer made its Nickelodeon television debut on August 14, 2000. One of the most-watched preschool television shows in the United States, it quickly developed into a social phenomenon. Dora graced the cover of the November 11, 2002, issue of *Newsweek*. 'Dora the Explorer Live,' which opened in 2003, became the Radio City Music Hall's all-time highest-grossing family show. When Dora appeared in the 2005 Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, she represented its first Latina character. Beyond this, *Dora* has received numerous awards, including the Peabody, Gracie Allen, ALMA, Imagen, and Latino Spirit.

Yet, despite the series' iconic status, *Dora* has received relatively little scholarly attention. In general, scholars have addressed the series as merely one component of two larger subjects: Latino-themed television (Masi de Casanova, 2007; Moran, 2007) and children's programming (Banet-Weiser, 2007; Berggreen & Lustyik, 2004). Little scholarship has focused specifically on *Dora* (for an example, see Harewood & Valdivia, 2005). In hope of sparking increased scholarly dialogue, we will focus our commentary on four critical dimensions of *Dora*: the show's metanarratives and structure; the use of Spanish; Dora as lead character; and *Dora*'s social relevance.

Metanarratives and Structure

Dora was developed through an intensive multiyear process. The creative and research teams considered various program concepts, developed a preschool curriculum based on Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences, and strove to seamlessly combine entertainment with education.

To capture and hold viewer attention, each episode features a linear narrative shaped around a high-stakes adventure, in which viewers help Dora overcome a series of structured challenges to reach their ultimate goal. As explained by cocreator and coexecutive producer Chris Gifford, 'We wanted to create a show that teaches little kids

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problem-solving skills ... strategies like stopping to think, asking for help, and using what you know are modeled in every *Dora* show' (Nick Jr., 2000). Drawing upon linearity (through The Map) and repetition (of themes, questions, and target vocabulary), the series emphasizes the importance of completing intermediary steps en route to achieving long-range goals.

Interactivity in the show fosters young viewer interest and facilitates learning (Anderson et al., 2000; Linebarger & Walker, 2005), while the curriculum of the show engages seven of Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences—visual/spatial, verbal/linguistic, logical/mathematical, bodily/kinesthetic, musical/auditory, naturalistic, interpersonal skills, and intrapersonal skills (Gardner, 1993). Led by Dora, viewers use linguistic intelligence (in Spanish and English) to solve problems, while The Map encourages viewers to use spatial intelligence. According to cocreator and coexecutive producer Valerie Walsh, 'One of the things I love most about the show, and something that makes it unique, is that viewers are asked to be active participants, not only by asking questions, but by getting off the couch and moving their bodies' (bodily/kinesthetic intelligence) (Nick Jr., 2000).

Finally, the high-stakes adventure takes place in a magical world replete with Latino touches—Spanish language, Latino-themed music, dichos (Latino sayings and proverbs), Dora's warm, embracing Latino extended family (familia), and Latino settings with people who reflect Latin America's racial and ethnic diversity. This added layer of cultural immersion adds to the metanarrative of the show and provides a source of identity for the growing Latino population in the US. Moreover, in Dora's world, realistic elements are juxtaposed in surprising ways within the Latin American literary and artistic tradition of magical realism.

The Use of Spanish

Another critical aspect of *Dora the Explorer* is the centrality of the Spanish language in the show. Although English serves as the show's primary language, the series also encourages and facilitates the learning of Spanish through the repetition of selected words and expressions (for a sociolinguistic analysis, see Masi de Casanova, 2007). Throughout the series, Spanish is used in seven fundamental ways:

1. Spanish and English are presented in a way that affirms both languages as rich systems of communication.
2. The series emphasizes universal Spanish words and expressions rather than those reflecting only a specific national origin.
3. Some characters, most obviously Dora, are Spanish-English bilinguals; some only speak English (Boots) and some only speak Spanish (Tico). Over the course of the series, monolingual characters naturally learn a bit of each others' languages.
4. The shows create situations in which Spanish becomes necessary to overcome obstacles and meet challenges.
5. When the same word is spoken in both Spanish and English, Spanish is sometimes used first, and at other times English is used first. This indicates that both languages are valuable and worthy of respect.
6. Spanish is treated not as a translation of English, but rather as a language that refers directly to the viewer's world. In order to reinforce this message of language equity, such expressions as 'Uno is the Spanish word for one' are avoided.

7. At times Spanish is used without presenting the same idea in English. Those untranslated interjections come in various forms: for example, greetings ('buenos días'); instructions ('corran'); exclamations ('¡Que grande!'); and expressions of endearment ('mis lindos bebés'). In this way, the series encourages viewers to try to make sense of Spanish through observing both the context in which the language is used and the things to which words refer (for example, by seeing numbers of items accompanied by 'uno, dos, tres' or colors identified as 'rojo,' 'azul,' and 'verde'). This approach might also help viewers develop greater comfort in everyday life when hearing a language they do not fully understand.

Dora as Lead Character

Such elements as problem solving, overcoming obstacles, high-stakes adventure, interactivity, Latino culture, and Spanish-English bilingualism become personified in the female lead character, 7-year-old Dora Marquez (named in honor of Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez) (Arrieta, 2008). An intelligent, inquisitive, active, determined, bilingual, problem-solving female, Dora embodies many of the criteria for female lead characters suggested by the Children Now report, *Reflections of Girls and Media* (1997).

Encouraged by her familia, she models the importance of dedicating yourself to the task at hand. Moreover, she addresses challenges with careful observation, clear logic, and evidence-based decision making, while encouraging viewers to join her in her adventures.

The series highlights Dora as pan-Latino rather than emphasizing a specific Latino national origin (Masi de Casanova, 2007; Harewood & Valdivia, 2005). Moreover, other Latinos reflect the various heritages of Latin America—Indian, African, European, and Asian—as well as the blending of these heritages.

Both bilingual and cross-culturally flexible, Dora uses her knowledge of both Spanish and English to overcome challenges and foster communication among monolingual characters. As a cross-cultural bridge-builder, she fosters teamwork among her diverse compatriots. Through her actions, Dora personifies, models, and reinforces a basic message of the series—you will have more opportunities in life if you learn to speak more than one language and learn about different cultures.

Social Relevance

Although the foregoing elements have contributed to *Dora's* success, they alone cannot fully explain why she has become such a national, even global, phenomenon. Drawing upon our multiyear involvement and personal observations as part of the *Dora* team (Diaz-Wionczek, Director of Research and Development; Lovelace, Research and Curriculum Development Consultant; Cortés, Creative and Cultural Advisor), as well as unsolicited anecdotal evidence, mainly from viewers and their families, we suggest that at least four relevant social factors have also played a role in *Dora*'s popularity.

First, the relative lack of strong female lead characters on children's television (Akerman, Strauss, & Bryant, 2008) has helped make Dora a welcome addition. Her message that women have agency seems to have reverberated among young girls around the world. Research suggests that viewers tend to identify with and become more interested in characters of the same gender (Martin & Halverson, 1981). One comparative study concluded that 'identification with Dora, perceiving Dora as similar to oneself, and

feeling motivated about Dora were primarily associated with being a girl rather than a boy' (Calvert, Strong, Jacobs, & Conger, 2007, p. 441). Yet, based on its popularity, Dora's magic seems to have worked with both boys and girls.

Second, before *Dora* there had been a dearth of Latino characters on preschool television, with the notable exception of *Sesame Street* (Borzekowski & Poussaint, 1998; Lovelace, Scheiner, Dollberg, Segui, & Black, 1994). Yet the United States' Latino population has surpassed forty-five million (60 percent growth during the 1990s alone). Moreover, Latinos are young (35 percent under the age of 18 compared with 26 percent nationwide), providing an expanding audience base of children who can identify ethnically with and take special pride in Dora (Fisch & Truglio, 2001). Interestingly, however, one comparative study came to the seemingly counterintuitive conclusion that 'Caucasian children perceived themselves as similar to Dora more than Hispanic children did, particularly Hispanic boys' (Calvert et al., 2007, p. 441). It seems that Dora is truly a 'crossover' phenomenon, although we need further research to understand this phenomenon.

Third, there has been growing global recognition of the value of being bilingual. Globalization has increasingly brought together people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, putting a premium on bilingual skills and cross-cultural abilities. By personifying and exemplifying bilingual and cross-cultural leadership, Dora has touched a chord among parents and children from both bilingual and monolingual backgrounds, who intuitively have grasped the excitement and value of learning to speak more than one language.

Finally, young children have an inherent need to sense greater influence over the increasingly complex world around them. Research has shown that they feel more empowered if they can interact successfully with televised challenges (Anderson et al., 2000). *Dora* raises the stakes on that interaction by creating situations that have serious consequences for viewers' actions. It embeds interactivity within the context of stories that are both challenging and safe. In that way the show empowers young viewers by involving them in helping Dora successfully complete her adventures. As observed by Chris Gifford, 'It's amazing to see the satisfaction it gives kids to help Dora solve a series of high-stakes problems. They're like proud partners who believe Dora couldn't have done it without them!' (2008).

In response to the success of the show, the *Dora* team has committed itself to making certain that the series continues to respond to these four factors, leading to three lines of action. First, the team has kept in mind the critical importance of improving televised Latino representation. Second, the team has continuously incorporated the advice of educational, language, cultural, and music consultants. Third, throughout the development and production process, the *Dora* team has conducted systematic research with preschool children from varied racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds, making program changes based on their responses.

Research Implications

Research questions abound. How has *Dora* influenced children's understanding of what girls can and cannot do? How has it affected the learning of Spanish, the desire to become bilingual, and views about Latinos and Latino culture? In what respects, such as self-identity, has *Dora* had a differential impact on children of various racial and ethnic backgrounds? What effect has *Dora*'s interactivity had on the learning

process of preschoolers? Moreover, what about *Dora's* international impact? Because Dora does not speak Spanish or have a clear Latino identity when the show is dubbed and shown in non-Spanish-speaking countries around the world, this is a rich comparative research area.

Dora is both a national and global phenomenon. As such, the show merits research about these and other questions. We hope that this commentary will provide a jumping off point for others to engage these questions and the many others that this successful program raises.

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