Engaging College Students in Experiential Learning: Learning Through Serving, Inspiring Through Experience, and Creating Identity Through Bilingual Poetry

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Experiential learning is the opportunity to meld teaching with experience; “to do” the things students learn about in the classroom, yet outside the classroom walls. I am an instructor that embraces experiential learning. Every other year, I lead a Chican@ Literature class which, after the semester is finished, culminates with a two-week excursion to New Mexico. While on-campus I highlight specific themes within Chicano narrative and poetry. Discussions focus on several key aspects regarding Chican@ Literature whose purpose is to create a voice for those whom have been marginalized within mainstream American culture. Chican@ Literature emphasizes a concept of origin which is reiterated in New Mexico through a sense of place in nature. A second topic often addressed in Chican@ Literature is the idea of *aprendizaje*. This is a journey of knowledge. In each episode experienced, the narrative voice gains a broader understanding of identity. This *aprendizaje* is also shared by my students as they gain a sense of self as defined by their own community in juxtaposition with their New Mexican fieldwork and the bilingual poetry they write. Lastly, Chican@ Literature often reveals an author or poet’s personal culture clash or cultural fusion within the creative work itself. Once again, my students write about their own perspectives in a poetry workshop and presented their pieces during a poetry slam. Some of these pieces are included in this manuscript.

Keywords: service-learning, experiential learning, bilingual poetry, Chican@ Literature

Introduction

Experiential learning is the opportunity to meld teaching with experience; “to do” the things students learn about in the classroom, yet outside the classroom walls.

I am an instructor that embraces experiential learning. Every other year, I lead a Chican@ Literature class that once the semester is finished, culminates in a two-week excursion to New Mexico. While on-campus I highlight specific themes within Chicano narrative and poetry. Discussions focus on several key aspects regarding Chican@ Literature whose purpose is to create a voice for those whom have been marginalized within mainstream American culture.

Chican@ Literature and in this case Chicano bilingual poetry is an expression of creativity coming out of a community on the margin. The purpose of this body of literature is to create a voice for those whom have been marginalized. Issues typically addressed are a sense of place, or a concept of origin. Often this theme will reflect prejudices endured, discrimination suffered, and an “us verses them” division within the community.

When considering our Chicano bilingual poetry readings by New Mexican authors, our understanding regarding a concept of origin gains a new perspective while in New Mexico. Our Service learning excursion reiterates a sense of place in nature in addition to raising awareness of agency, authority, adaptation, and assimilation.

A second topic of note often found in Chicano poetry is the idea of *aprendizaje*. This is a journey of knowledge. The narrator within the work gains a broader understanding of their own identity and a sense of self as defined by their community and society at large. Sometimes, the knowledge gained is acquired through a loss, a dislocation, and a subsequent finding or acceptance of self. This *aprendizaje* is also shared by my students as they gain a sense of self as defined by their own community in juxtaposition with their New Mexican fieldwork and the bilingual poetry they write.

Lastly, an emphasis regarding the poet's personal culture clash or cultural fusion guides the path they have chosen, or has been given to them. The culture clash can be a conflict between two languages, two belief systems, and two heritages. Or a cultural fusion can embody the intermixing, intermeshing, and coming together in that individual. Therefore the two, create one unique identity.

This final focus especially resonates with my students. To culminate our writing exercises in class, my students write about their own perspectives in a creative writing and poetry workshop. These poems were presented May 2014 while in Albuquerque, New Mexico to one of the Chicano poets we studied throughout our semester course. Mr. Levi Romero graciously gave us feedback and encouraged us all to continue our creative writing process. Romero's poetry collections are *A Poetry of Remembrance: New and Rejected Works* (2008) and his co-authored photo poetics text, *Sagrado* (2013).

What Is the Purpose of Service Learning?

"Across the United States and around the world, students and their instructors are leaving the classroom and engaging with their communities in order to make learning come alive and to experience real-life connections between their education and everyday issues" beyond the academic campus. (Cress, 2013, p. 9)

These types of connections I strive to facilitate in my Spring Semester Chican@ Literature course, which culminates in a two-week excursion throughout New Mexico. While on campus, class discussions and readings address immigration rights and adjustments to life within the "American Dream". Additionally, we reflect on our role influenced by our own culture(s) juxtaposed to life on the border and Spanish speaking Latino communities in the United States.

Not only do we read Chicano narrative and poetry supplemented with socio-historical texts, there is also a service-learning component to the course in which we volunteer in Gallup, New Mexico on the Navajo Reservation within the Head Start afterschool program at Rehoboth School as well as in Española, New Mexico at the Española Valley Animal Shelter. These experiences demonstrate, like Christine Cress emphasizes in *Learning Through Serving* that, "Service-Learning invites you to bring who you are, what you know, and what you can do into the classroom and the world beyond... [in order to create] community change" (Cress, 2013, p. 37).

Courses such as my Chican@ Literature class make both the instructor and the student, question their own personal identity and help solidify this developing identity. That is to say, "Putting who you are and what you know into practice will change who you are and... enlarge your understanding of yourself and the world of others who are both different from and similar to you" (Cress, 2013, p. 37).

“In forming a community with others...you increase the possibilities for creating transformation” (Cress, 2013, p. 37). However, Rachel Naomi Remen (1999) quoted in Cress, reminds participants in service-learning projects to be aware of the differences and intentions behind the acts of helping, fixing, and serving. Remen explains that, “Helping is not a relationship between equals. A helper may see others as weaker than they are, needier than they are, and people often feel this inequality” (Cress, 2013, p. 45). “In fixing, we see others as broken... Fixers trust their own expertise but may not see the wholeness in another person or trust the integrity of the life in them” (Cress, 2013, p. 45). Yet, “When we serve, we see and trust that wholeness. We respond to it and collaborate with it. And when we see the wholeness in another, we strengthen it” (Cress, 2013, p. 45). “The ‘learning’ part of the term *service-learning* suggests that we have powerful opportunities to learn and to grow... [True] *reciprocity* can result from our interactions” (Cress, 2013, p. 46).

Chican@ Literature taught through a Service Learning lens helps engage students in the formation of their own identity. The Service Learning component teaches collaboration within a community of equals. The purpose of reading bilingual poetry and then creating our own helps the student-author voice their concept of origin, their journey of *aprendizaje*, and a new understanding of reciprocity based on their own cultural clashes or fusions.

Why Bilingual Poetry Works in Service-Learning Courses

Sonia Nieto, a well published author on the effects of language and culture in teaching within the United States, advocates for creating a classroom of acceptance where students’ identity is affirmed through multiculturalism and multilingualism.

Nieto explains that sociocultural perspectives regarding teaching are based upon,

the assumption that social relationships and political realities are at the heart of teaching and learning. That is, learning emerges from the social, cultural, and political spaces in which it takes place, and through the interactions and relationships that occur between learners and teachers. (2010, p. 4)

This is supported by Paulo Freire’s educational pedagogy theory (1985) which states, “To study is not to consume ideas, but to create and re-create them” thereby establishing a mutual discovery shared by students and their teachers (Nieto, 2010, p. 5).

The above idea I promoted in our Chican@ Literature class’s final poetry project on campus, which then facilitated our Poetry Slam May 2014 in Albuquerque, New Mexico with Chicano Poet, Mr. Levi Romero. This experience enabled my students to reflect upon their own experiences through bilingual poetry and transmit knowledge about their own culture(s). This was not only a learning process for the student-authors to eloquently express themselves in writing but also created an opportunity for the audience to learn from the student-authors’ multicultural perspective.

I believe this project was such a success because our community in Grand Rapids, Michigan and on campus at Aquinas College is seemingly very homogeneous. However, as the student-authors shared their bilingual poetry, their cultural differences gained a voice within a safe space, whether in our classroom or performed at the Poetry Slam.

As one reads the following student-authored poetry, each piece includes a concept of one’s past, a road taken along which knowledge has been gained, and where cultural fusion or clashes have occurred. These student-poets challenge their readers to accept their own sense of place, continue their path toward understanding, and to acknowledge the struggles they have encountered in order to evolve.

Higgins Lake
Sydne Harris

Vengo del lago Higgins
180 feet of ground cold spring-fed water
Y es el líquido que está en mis venas

Sleepy cabins and misty mornings
Dirt roads and wooden docks

Higgins Lake
¿Ha visitado?

Es un secreto that too many do not keep
We flinch at their un-earned claims:
“Tengo una casita allí”
“I’ve vacationed there since I was little”

¡Por favor!
Clean up your mess
Pack your coolers

Soy la hija de nativos orgullosos
Brutal Northern Winters
Solo tres meses de glorious sun
Es el precio que pagamos para ser locales
This is how they raised us

Soy de las travesías a las dos de la madrugada
Bare feet flying
Down the dirt roads
Through the sand
On the dock

The boats nestled safely in their hoists
Under their canopies

Nosotros
Protegidos debajo de una manta de las estrellas
Navigational lights
Rojo y Verde

Somos amigos with the downstaters
And the Bud-Light they steal from their parents' coolers

Soy de quart jars of stewed tomatoes
Chili sauce and beets
Wild blueberries and spearmint
Sun tea

Humming birdfood
Hot
Sticky
Red

Soy de los deberes a las cinco de la mañana
Cuando a los trece años
I'd ride my bike down the lake road
In the light of dawn that looked like dusk
Aprons
Hot *aceite*
Fry-cakes
A long john for the early-morning fisherman
"Creme-filled, please"

Vengo del lago Higgins
Una escuela
Una iglesia
45 minutes to the nearest supermarket

Nada más

Soy de choppy whitecaps y
Warm western breezes
That carry the smell of shore line bonfires
Across the rippling nightwater

Its in the tint of my skin
Es el latido de mi corazón

*Abalone Shells***Amanda Avella**

*Vengo del océano pacífico,
un pueblo tan cerca del mar
you could smell it from my front yard
donde las olas parecían como caballos galopeándose*

*En el jardín de mi vecino,
there were abalone shells
Small overlooked treasures
On the outside they aren't very special,
pero en el interior, brillan como un arco iris.*

*Vengo de los libros,
las páginas that rustle,
like whispers,
las historias de las personas que querían convertirse en algo más
y de los lugares donde un día, iré.*

*Vengo del nido de mis amigos,
incluso Alyssa,
who was seven years older than me,
y de ella yo aprendí sobre las cosas importantes,
como la verdad sobre Santa Claus*

*Aunque ella paró de hablar conmigo
después de que su padre se murió diving for abalone shells
She is still my friend.*

*Y Micaela, quien la conozco por casi una década.
Who has gone with me through every weird phase
and sent me letters in the mail
y hablaba conmigo desde el teléfono por horas,
aunque no tuvimos nada significativo de compartir.*

*Soy de los días spent staring up al cielo desde mi trampoline,
wondering when I'll become an adult and figure it all out
Lying there, I realize my time like this is short
I know that someday
we won't be able to play pretend*

Alyssa taught me that
but I don't need to know those secrets today
So, I jump off and dig my bare feet into the ground.

*Yo soy la hija de mi madre,
quien me apoya sin condiciones,
as long as I never ride a motorcycle
or get a tattoo*

*Durante mi primer día a la universidad,
mi madre me preguntaba porque estaba llorando,
solo pude decir, "I miss my cat".*

*Ahora vivo en Michigan
Un pueblo, that doesn't smell del mar
y mis vecinos no tienen
abalone shells en sus jardines
pero está bien.*

*Un día me gustaría caminar la calle donde yo crecía
to see if there are still abalone shells
en el jardín
And if there are
tocará la puerta
wondering if Alyssa todavía piensa en mí.*

*Soy de aquí, y soy de allá***Peri Erhan***Soy de aquí,*

playing in the fields behind my grandmother's house
where I learned to catch grasshoppers and climb trees

Y soy de allá,

spending my summers at the *ada* on the Marmara Sea
chasing around stray dogs and
watching the lights from Istanbul from my bedroom window

Soy de aquí,

where my curfew was being home "by streetlights"
and a place where we never locked our doors

Y soy de allá,

where the man is the head of the household
and the woman is not heard

Soy de aquí,

where we go camping in the summer
sledding in the winter
drink fresh apple cider in the fall
and ride our bikes in the spring

Y soy de allá,

where we eat lamb instead of beef
and drink *raki* instead of beer

Soy de unafamilia of 2 brothers, 4 sisters, and 32 cousins*una familia* of "every other weekends"

one weekend at St. Alphonsus learning the Bible
and one weekend at the Mosque learning the *Quran*

Soy de aquí, where you are hated for being a Muslim*Y soy de allá,* where you are hated for being a Christian*Soy de aquí,* with the water from Lake Michigan flowing through my veins*Y soy de allá,* with the wind from Bürgazada blowing in my hair*Soy de aquí, y soy de allá,*

I am from here, but I am also from there.

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Appendix A: Biographies**Sydne Harris**

Ms. Harris is a 2014 Aquinas College graduate in Community Leadership and Spanish. Her passion is advocating for marginalized people and giving voice to women's issues such as the need for education and stopping domestic violence.

Sydne is from the small town of Higgins Lake, Michigan a picturesque inland lake town with a State Park. She holds nostalgic memories of her childhood and emphasizes her connection with a sense of place, that of Higgins Lake. She has felt the positives and negatives regarding her concept of origin. She has a strong idea of who she is in juxtaposition with those who claim authority within her hometown. In her poem she addresses an "us verses them" division within the community. Yet, overall she embraces the notion of accepting others as part of the evolutionary process of accepting one's self.

Amanda Avella

Ms. Avella, class of 2016, is a Biology and Spanish double major. Her joy is found in nature and self expression as she also tutors in the Aquinas Student Academic Services Writing Center.

Amanda is an excellent peer mentor. She understands that life, and the experiences one encounters, is the ultimate teacher. Her poem, "Abalone Shells" is an episodic journey through her childhood. She details her pivotal points in life, moving away from the West Coast to Michigan, loss of kindred spirits, and her own coming of age. Ultimately, her dislocation has led to her own acceptance of self.

Peri Erhan

Ms. Erhan graduated May 2014 as a dual major in Spanish and Psychology. Peri is new to writing poetry but feels proud to share *her* story regarding her cultural background and cultural differences.

"I am from here, I am from there" highlights Peri's Turkish and Polish-American heritage. Her poem emphasizes both the culture clash and cultural fusion that created who she is as a young outspoken woman living within two cultures.

Dr. Shelli Rottschafer

Dr. Shelli Rottschafer attended Hope College in Holland, Michigan for her BA in Spanish and History (1996). She completed her Masters in Spanish from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio (1999). In 2005 she completed her doctorate from the University of New Mexico in Latin American Contemporary Literature. Additionally, she earned her Teaching Certificate from The Santa Fe University of Art and Design in New Mexico (2005).

Since Fall 2006, Dr. Rottschafer has taught at Aquinas College, a small liberal arts college in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She teaches Spanish Language and Writing courses, Chican@ / Latin@ Literature, and Hispanic Film. She also leads experiential and service learning projects. Fall 2014, Dr. Rottschafer was appointed the Director of the Contemporary Writers Series, which invites four acclaimed authors to campus throughout the academic school year. Previous authors of note have been Luis J. Rodríguez, Luis Alberto Urrea, Peter Ho Davies, and Sarah Kay. In addition to this role, Dr. Rottschafer also has begun teaching First-Year Composition within the Department of Inquiry and Expression.