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Whose Latino/a Studies? Teaching Latinidad as a Güero on a Predominantly Anglo, Socially Conservative Campus

Justin D. García

Administrators at colleges and universities heavily promote “diversity” and “multiculturalism,” although these topics are not always as enthusiastically received by students. Mandatory general education courses in cultural diversity and/or ethnic studies have been implemented as part of the curriculum at many institutions nationwide, but contentious exchanges between students and various forms of resistance from white students are fairly common in such courses. Non-white students often have competing visions and agendas pertaining to identity politics, which also play out in the classroom. As the nation’s demographics shift towards a society with a rapidly increasing non-white population, these dynamics are likely to increase in scope on campuses across the country. Using Millersville University of Pennsylvania, a public state-owned university in the northeastern United States, as a case study, the author discusses some of the common challenges that arise when attempting to teach Latino Studies, Anthropology, and other social science and humanities courses, as well as discussing why cultural diversity is often divisive and emotional material. He also provides examples of effective classroom exercises when teaching latinidad.

“Diversity” and “multiculturalism” have gained such currency on colleges and universities in recent years that such terms have become quasi-buzzwords within higher education across the United States. However, this official administrative/institutional embrace of multiculturalism does not necessarily ensure that the faculty and campus administrators assigned to carry out the college’s or university’s diversity mission will be met with equal acceptance among the student body. Expressing a commitment to and respect for diversity is one thing; the actual implementation of diversity in a manner that conveys to students the administration’s professed admiration for said diversity is another matter altogether. The former is clear-cut and simple; the latter is considerably more ambiguous, arduous, and quite difficult to attain.

In this paper, I share my experiences of teaching courses in anthropology, cultural diversity, and Latino/a Studies as a second-generation, Mexican American male at a primarily white (Anglo) and working-class public state university located in a small rural Pennsylvania community. In addition to discussing my experiences teaching *latinidad* and cultural diversity at the university level, I provide some teaching activities and classroom strategies that I have

found to be quite effective in broaching these topics with a majority white classroom throughout my teaching career. I am the son of a formerly undocumented Mexican immigrant father from Zacatecas and a Pennsylvania German mother. I grew up in a bilingual home (as a result of two non-English speaking paternal uncles who lived with my family at different points in my childhood), although my Spanish comprehension skills are stronger than my speaking proficiency. I am the first member of my family, on either side, to attend college, let alone earn a Ph.D., which I obtained from Temple University in May 2011. My doctoral preparation is in urban anthropology, with a specific focus in the dynamics of community relations and racial/ethnic conflict. This academic training in ethnographic research methodology, with its emphasis on critical analysis of observations and attention to reflexivity, has imparted in me quasi-instinctual reflexes to observe, contemplate, and analyze the nature of student interactions with one another around campus and in the classroom.

Topics such as race, racism, immigration, and cultural diversity are among the most contentious social issues in American society, and when such topics inevitably arise during anthropology and ethnic studies courses, they often generate palpable atmospheres of varying moods that are conveyed through students' verbal and non-verbal reactions – from awkward silence, to uneasiness and discomfort, to fear, and to anger or frustration. Individual students' emotional reactions vary tremendously and are profoundly influenced by their own respective social locations, life experiences, and prior exposure (or lack thereof) to human difference and cultural diversity, as well as their respective knowledge of diversity, race/racism, and immigration. Importantly, students' knowledge of these topics is not necessarily rooted in a factual or scholarly foundation, but instead may be more of a *social* knowledge than an *academic* knowledge. I use the term “social knowledge” to refer to ideas and (mis)information that people use to make sense of the world around them that are primarily rooted in hearsay, opinions or

beliefs, and/or popular media discourses, rather than academic or empirical research. Since all persons have had their own idiosyncratic sets of life experiences, which have been shaped and influenced by the confluence of multiple variables such as social class, sexuality, gender, race/ethnicity, citizenship or immigration status, and geographic locale, among others, each person has their own distinct “prism” or “filter” through which they have come to view the world and understand/interpret the society around them. Chicana anthropologist Patricia Zavella refers to this intersection of multiple variables in shaping one’s respective life experiences and social outlook as “social location” (188-193). Understandably, misunderstandings quickly arise and tensions escalate when persons who come from very different social/cultural backgrounds fail to recognize the significance that their own respective social locations have played in constructing their respective worldviews and subsequently naively assume that *their* perspective is *the legitimate* perspective, thereby ensuring acrimonious exchanges between different social actors. These dynamics pervade many emotionally-laden lectures and discussions about cultural diversity and human relations in the college classroom, complicating the instructor’s efforts to effectively teach such subject matter to students.

Significance/Implications

Given the nation’s rapidly shifting demographics, non-white students and students who are either immigrants or the children of immigrants are poised to account for much of the growth in higher education enrollment nationwide in the coming years. These shifting demographics will likely encourage campuses to publicly praise “diversity” and “multiculturalism” with greater emphasis than already is the case. Nevertheless, white students will remain the majority of the student body at most colleges and universities throughout the nation, with certain limited exceptions, as in the cases of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (educational institutions where Hispanic/Latino students

comprise at least 25 percent of student enrollment), and certain public institutions in urbanized locales (such as the various City University of New York branch campuses).

Although professed commitments to diversity and multiculturalism are already a part of the missions statements and institutional programming of many colleges and universities, certain scholars (Goode 434-438; Goode and Schneider 65-71) have heavily criticized traditional approaches towards multiculturalism for attempting to focus on colorful and exotic displays of food, music, and dancing – the “safe” aspects of group difference – while conveniently overlooking issues of power, privilege, and inequality, which are the actual sources of conflict and division within society. A major limitation of this strategy is that by solely focusing on “safe” topics, students’ pre-existing racialized views of “the other” remain intact and unchallenged. Others (Newitz and Wray 168-170) also criticize traditional approaches towards multiculturalism and diversity for their tendency to depict socially-defined racial and ethnic groups in monolithic and essentialized fashion, thereby reifying ideas of fundamental and immutable cultural differences between groups while ignoring the internal social/cultural diversity within groups. Such is the case when a diversity workshop at a freshmen orientation (mis)educates students about the presumed existence of a singular “Latino culture” and proceeds to stereotype and essentialize Latin men as “excessively macho” and Latin women as “overly passive.”

In order to prepare American students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds for the nation’s new demographic and cultural realities, as well as preparing students to participate in the globalized workforce of the 21st century, I recommend a new approach towards diversity. Teachers, professors, and educational administrators must move away from simply attempting to celebrate diversity (through essentialized displays of group differences) towards teaching students to critically understand diversity (by emphasizing the complex and

multifaceted nature of cultural identity formation, internal diversity within groups, and the importance of social location in producing a wide continuum of socio-cultural experiences). Cultural diversity does not solely exist *between* groups; it also exists *within* groups. These are fundamental concepts that I strive to convey to students in all of my courses, and I offer two examples below of in-class activities designed to raise students' awareness of such concepts (my examples focus specifically on *latinidad*, although they could easily be modified so as to be applied to deconstructing other racial or pan-ethnic categories as well). Before presenting my two sample in-class exercises, however, I discuss the various challenges of teaching cultural diversity and *latinidad* at Millersville University of Pennsylvania, while highlighting the various factors that spark student resistance, escalated emotions, and intra-Latino divisions on Millersville's campus. Although each college/university is situated within its own unique socio-historical context which shapes the dynamics of its specific campus climate, the challenges that instructors confront in teaching cultural diversity at Millersville University are reflective of those at many other institutions throughout the United States.

Millersville University: A Quick Overview

Before discussing my specific experiences in teaching issues of *latinidad* and cultural diversity in detail, I would like to provide a general overview of my university. Anthropologists have increasingly emphasized that matters of race/ethnicity are fluid and dynamic phenomena that are contingent upon social context (Goode and Schneider 65-69; Hartigan, *Racial Situations* 11-19, Hartigan *Odd Tribes* 5-12; Vigil 123-140). Millersville University is one of fourteen state-funded, public universities that comprise the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE). Millersville University is located in historic Lancaster County, which is nationally known for its large Amish communities and prominent Pennsylvania Dutch heritage.

Millersville is about 75 miles west of Philadelphia, about an hour and a half's drive away. The

university enrolls approximately 8,500 mostly undergraduate students, and its student body is overwhelmingly white. According to the university's website, white students represent 80 percent of the total enrollment, while 9 percent of students are black or African American, 7 percent are Latino, and 2 percent are Asian/Pacific American. The university is primarily a commuter school, with the majority of its students living off campus. This is because a large segment of the student body comes directly from Lancaster County. Nevertheless, approximately a quarter of students live in the dormitories on campus. Millersville is also known as a "suitcase campus," meaning that a significant portion of students living on campus go home on the weekends and do not return until Sunday evening or Monday morning.

A clearly evident and palpable racial divide marks Millersville, which I contend has geographic underpinnings stemming from the socio-cultural environments of students' home communities. The vast majorities of white students are local and come from the small towns and rural areas in the periphery of Lancaster County, while the majority of black students come from inner-city North Philadelphia or West Philadelphia neighborhoods. Most of the Latino students come from either nearby Lancaster City or, to a lesser extent, from Philadelphia and urban neighborhoods in Reading, Harrisburg, and York (three small cities in neighboring counties that are each relatively equidistant from Millersville). Lancaster City is the only urbanized area within Lancaster County; it is a small city of 60,000 residents with a majority Latino population and a sizable black minority. As with most cities in the northeastern United States, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans comprise the majority of Lancaster City's Latino community.

Geography fuels the student divide at Millersville because, despite the relative close proximity of these various locales in southeastern Pennsylvania, many of the students from Lancaster County and Philadelphia alike have had little to no exposure of life outside their

respective communities prior to their arrival on campus their freshmen year. With the exception of Lancaster City, Lancaster County is extremely conservative, both politically and socially, and has been identified as one of the most heavily Republican counties in the entire nation. The area is also highly religious, and fundamentalist evangelical Christianity holds a powerful sway over the local culture. Given these social and cultural dynamics of Lancaster County, and the fact that many students who come from its rural and peripheral regions have had little previous contact with non-white persons, racial misunderstandings, stereotypes, and outright prejudices persist on campus. This is exacerbated by the fact that most black students have not had prior exposure to white persons with viewpoints either as conservative or as “racially unenlightened” (also known as “ignorant,” in the common parlance of students of color at the university) prior to arriving on Millersville’s campus. Philadelphia is in many respects Lancaster County’s social and political inverse; the City of Brotherly Love is one of the nation’s most heavily Democratic-leaning cities, and Philadelphia has a long history of immigration and ethnic/religious diversity dating to the colonial period (Takenaka and Osirim 1-4). Such dynamics serve as the basis of Pennsylvania’s nationwide reputation as a socially and cultural dichotomized state, reflected in the label “Pennsylvucky” (a portmanteau of “Pennsylvania” and “Kentucky”) – which implies that the state is comprised of two modern, progressive metropolises, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, at its opposite corners and a vast region of presumed “backwardness,” conservatism, and intolerance in between. While this “Pennsylvucky” image greatly simplifies the Keystone State’s internal socio-cultural complexities, it does acknowledge the fact that, in the abstract, the Philadelphia region and central Pennsylvania are quite socially distinct from one another.

This is the context in which I, an assistant professor of anthropology, am assigned to teach courses in cultural diversity, race/ethnicity, immigration, and Latino studies. The

aforementioned campus dynamics are further compounded by the fact that I am a very fair-complexioned or *güero*, second-generation Mexican American male who has an Anglo first name, but a very ethnic surname. My own specific social location further compounds my experiences as a professor at Millersville because although the majority of the white segment of the student body has had little prior exposure to racial/ethnic diversity, the university's administration places a tremendous emphasis on multiculturalism and diversity. The administration aims to cultivate a multicultural campus climate through a variety of means, including annual "Cultural Events" series of talks and seminars that are dedicated to African American and Latino issues (food and music festivals, public lectures by authors of color, open mic nights, etc.), a required reading assignment for all incoming freshmen called "One Book, One Campus" (usually consisting of a high-profile book written by an African American, Latino/a, or other author of color), frequent public panels on diversity-related issues (racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, etc.), a freshmen "Ethnic Studies" seminar for certain new black and Latino students, and the administration's continual expressions of support for its African American and Latino student organizations (Black Student Union and Society on Latino Affairs, respectively).

These strategies are not unique to Millersville University. Indeed, they are reflective of most colleges and universities nationwide over the past twenty-five years or so as part of the nation's general shift towards a greater acceptance of pluralism and cultural diversity. However, these very strategies are often perceived by many of Millersville's white students as discomforting, "divisive" or "reverse racism." Such sentiments are revealed in graffiti scribbled in bathroom stalls and walls, letters to the editor in the student newspaper, conflicts between students in the residence halls, and at times, openly and explicitly during class discussions. As an example, during a discussion in my "Gender, Race, and Class" course this past semester, a

white female student boldly asserted to her classmates that she represented the “real minority” on campus because the other students on the floor of her dorm were “almost all black, Hispanic, or international exchange students.” She then angrily expressed her disapproval of ethnic student organizations at the university because the mere existence of such clubs makes her “feel out of place.” As discussed previously, the majority of white students come from predominantly small-town and rural white communities. In such settings, issues of diversity generate little to no attention from local residents, public officials, or educational curricula, and for students from these settings to enter a campus environment where multiculturalism is so heavily promoted appears intimidating and serves as a bitter form of culture shock. The relatively small numbers of African American and Latino students commonly interpret such white alienation as racism, which further evokes defensiveness and anger among white students in a classic vicious cycle. Numerous observers, such as progressive scholars Ronald Takaki and Howard Ehrlich and conservative pundit Thomas Sowell, have noted similar tensions arising from multiculturalism on college campuses across the country. In analyzing the undercurrents of ethnic divisions on campus, Enrich points out that “For the most part, students arrive at college without significant intergroup or multicultural experiences. Their life experiences have been generally confined to segregated neighborhoods and predominantly segregated schools . . . the incoming students enter a world of some greater diversity than what they left. But it is an age-segregated world of essentially equally naïve actors” (285). Takaki, on the other hand, observes that efforts to incorporate multicultural perspectives into the traditional canons of academia have often been met with bitter resistance among conservatives and erstwhile liberals, who find efforts to diversify curricula to be unnecessary, rooted in identity politics and “political correctness” rather than scholarship, or “divisive” or “anti-American” because they draw attention to oppression and inequality that mark the nation’s history past and present (305-313).

This backdrop made for a highly contentious course, titled Latino Immigration, which I taught during the Spring 2012 semester. Given the specific subject matter of this course, approximately 2/3 of the students enrolled in this class were of various Latino heritages. About 10 percent of students enrolled were African American, and one student was a Haitian immigrant. The remaining 25 percent or so of the class were white/Anglo. Fully aware that immigration policy is one of the most contentious issues in American society, and that conservative activists in Pennsylvania managed to inspire state hearings on whether an alleged “left-wing bias” existed in social science courses at Millersville and other PASSHE and state-related schools (Penn State University, Temple University, and the University of Pittsburgh) in 2006, I carefully structured the course from a historical perspective that examined the economic and political dynamics that foster international migrations from various Latin American societies. Several Latino students, mostly Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, and Dominicans, became enthralled in the subject matter and frequently participated in class discussion by relating the assigned readings to their own, or their relatives’, personal experiences. Topics such as the “English-as-the-Official Language” Movement, the DREAM Act, Arizona’s SB 1070, Arizona’s Ethnic Studies Ban, and the recent murder of a Mexican immigrant by four white teenagers in the working-class town of Shenandoah, PA, particularly resonated with students. However, one white male student, a self-described “patriotic, conservative American” (whom I shall call “Bryan”) regularly took exception with other students’ comments and adamantly expressed his opposition to the DREAM Act and his strong support for Official English and SB 1070 legislation. While Bryan, like all students, is entitled to his own personal and political viewpoints, and I did my best to run the course from as neutral a position as possible, Bryan’s conduct in class over the course of the semester bordered on disrespect as he, at times, attempted to debate black and Latino students over the validity of their experiences

and often spoke in a condescending tone towards others. Evidently, Bryan assumed that his respective social location (as a white male and an American citizen) entitled him with a degree of authority and seniority over the non-white students in class.

Some of Bryan's more egregious statements included his claim early in the semester that the very theme of the course itself, a class focusing on migration from Latin America, was – at its very heart – exclusionary and “racist” because it limited its focus to Latinos. Uttered defensively during a class lecture and discussion pertaining to Arizona's ban on Ethnic Studies (HB 2281), Bryan's comment evoked gasps and loud sighs of disgust from most of the others in the room. On another occasion, Bryan belittled a classmate – a Tejana in her mid-40s who grew up in San Antonio but who had relocated to Pennsylvania after meeting her husband – by bluntly asserting that she did not “know what racism is.” Bryan's charge stemmed from his disapproval of a comment that the Tejana student raised during a discussion on Arizona's SB 1070, whereby she expressed concern that her Mexican American relatives living in Arizona, all of whom had been born in the United States, would be subjected to unnecessary racial profiling if the law was implemented. For most of the semester, the classroom atmosphere remained tense and on edge, with several students who regularly participated in discussion towards the beginning of the semester eventually refraining from talking in class altogether. Most student visits to my office that semester consisted of black and Latino students venting about Bryan, but a few white students who were concerned that Bryan's conduct would foster a general “anti-white” backlash among Latino students (or “guilt by racial association”) also visited me during office hours. One white female student emailed me that she felt “uncomfortable” about the “demographics” of the class.

Other Challenges

Teaching *latinidad* at Millersville poses other challenges, albeit considerably less hostile. Given my personal family history as the grandson of a *bracero* who worked in the fields of California during the 1950s and the son of a formerly undocumented migrant who crossed the Rio Grande in search of employment building cattle fences in Texas in the early 1970s, my primary teaching and research interests center on the social experiences of Chicanos/Mexicanos. In the northeastern United States, however, “Chicano Studies” and “Mexican American Studies” do not exist as they do in the southwest because the Mexican American population of New England and the Mid-Atlantic states, while growing, is still relatively small. Puerto Ricans and Dominicans account for the two largest Latino nationalities in this region of the country, in addition to smaller communities of Mexicans, Colombians, Cubans, Peruvians, Ecuadorians, Panamanians, and Central Americans. The heterogeneity of Latinos in the northeast has consequently led to the establishment of more general, pan-ethnic “Latino Studies” courses and curricula in higher education. Finding the proper balance when designing “Latino Studies” courses can be challenging, because most of the existing scholarship, literature, and films pertaining to *latinidad* focus on Chicanos/Mexicanos in the southwest and, to a lesser degree, Puerto Ricans in the northeast and Cubans in southern Florida. Almost by default, then, “Latino Studies” courses and pan-ethnic social science anthologies on Latinos concentrate on the traditional trinity of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans, who have comprised the largest and most socially and politically influential segments of the U.S. Latino population since the mid-20th century.

These factors inevitably raise proverbial explicit or implicit rhetorical questions of “Whose Latino Studies is this?” among students, a legitimate question that is further complicated by the fact that many “Latinos” in the northeast prefer to self-identify by their respective ethno-national heritages, rather than self-identifying collectively and generically as

“Latinos.” As noted by Nicholas De Genova and Ana Ramos-Zayas (178-183, 204-206), it is primarily the second- and third-generation children and grandchildren of migrants, who were born and raised on the U.S. mainland and lack a strong degree of cultural identification with Puerto Ricanness, Mexicaness, Dominicaness, etc., who are most likely to primarily self-identify as “Latino” or “Latina.” Even so, the label “Latino” as a marker of self-identification is frequently invoked ethnocentrically, with persons using this pan-ethnic label, oftentimes unbeknownst to them, in reference to traditions, customs, issues, or identities that are specific to their own respective ethno-national heritage (such as referring to *Día de los Muertos*, *Cinco de Mayo*, or the Puerto Rican Day Parade as “Latino” events). The Pennsylvania Statewide Latino Coalition’s annual conference, for example, had for years generated some complaints among certain attendees that the conference harbors too much of a “Puerto Rican focus” at the expense of other Latino communities and ethnic heritages within the state.

Of course, *latinidad* is multifaceted and plays out differently in different contexts and specific regions and locations across the United States. In the northeast, persons of Puerto Rican roots may self-identify as a *Boricua* or *Nuyorican*. Many Mexican Americans in Texas describe themselves as *Tejanos* to express state pride in being a Texan while also acknowledging their ethnic heritage. Likewise in California and other parts of the southwest, the term *Chicano* may be used by some of Mexican ancestry as a term of ethnic pride. Increased social interactions across ethnic lines have led to the emergence of new cultural identities, such as *Blaxican* (a person of African American and Mexican descent) in Los Angeles and *MexiRican* or *PortoMex* in Chicago. However, much of the discourse on *latinidad* continues to operate from one-dimensional, pan-ethnic essentialism of a presumed singular, monolithic Latino culture and identity that obscures the vast range of Latinos’ social and psychological experiences within specific locales and contexts across the nation.

Specifically, my teaching seeks to discourage students from engaging in simplistic, essentialized understandings of Latinos and other racial/ethnic groups by raising students' awareness that race and ethnicity are socially constructed phenomena and that cultural identities are fluid, dynamic, complex, and multifaceted through emphasizing, above all else, that cultural diversity exists *within* socially-defined racial/ethnic groups, and not just *between* such groups (as is often portrayed in traditional or "vulgar" approaches towards multiculturalism). Utilizing a critical multiculturalism theoretical approach, my "Issues of Latino Identity" course, for example, emphasizes that third-generation Chicanos in Los Angeles, second-generation Nuyoricans in the Bronx, Cuban refugees in Miami, and Dominican immigrants in Boston all have distinct cultural identities and social locations, despite their general classification as "Latinos" by the larger American society. This deconstruction of *latinidad* is necessary, given the prevalence of identity politics among Latino/a students on campus as discussed earlier.

My Latino Studies courses likewise address and critically examine matters of intra-Latino conflict, including tensions and prejudices between Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, or between Afro-Latinos and fair-complexioned Latinos that persist in Latino communities throughout the northeast. However, the most polarizing phenomenon of intra-Latino divisions at Millersville pertains to identity politics struggles between Puerto Rican students who are island natives (those who were born and raised in Puerto Rico) and students of Puerto Rican heritage who were born and raised on the U.S. mainland. As Puerto Ricans account for the largest segment of Latino students on campus, and there are significant numbers of both "islander" and "mainlander" Puerto Ricans, this makes for some highly emotional classroom discussions regarding constructs of cultural identity, ethnic authenticity, and language issues. Language as a central component of Latino identity is a

particularly heated topic that often breaks along generational lines, as first-generation students who grew up in Puerto Rico or other Latin American societies generally assert the viewpoint that an individual is “not really Latino” if they lack the ability to speak Spanish. This view is bitterly contested by most of the U.S.-born Latino students, particularly those who comprehend little or no Spanish.

Some ethnic studies scholars and multicultural/diversity coordinators whom I have known during my professional career have indicated to me that they would prefer that I avoid such sensitive topics in the classroom out of fear that by addressing them, white students might find “justification” for holding racist, prejudiced, or xenophobic beliefs of their own. Vaca (1-5, 185-193) notes that such concerns are not uncommon among progressives, who fear that analyzing intra-Latino conflict and animus between minority communities undermines the “rainbow coalition” discourse of race relations, which posits that various peoples of color and progressive whites must maintain a united social and political front against white racism. Nevertheless, the notion of a political “rainbow coalition” may itself be more wishful thinking among progressive academics and activists than reality, as individuals tend to base their political leanings and voting patterns in accordance with their own perceived economic, social, and personal interests.

It is no surprise, then, that African American and Latino students themselves raise issues of intra-Latino and intra-minority conflicts on their own in my classes, precisely because they have lived in communities where they are exposed to such tensions on a regular basis! These topics, therefore, are personal and important to them. Numerous students of color have praised or thanked me throughout the years for not attempting to stifle these topics when they arise during class discussions (as they claim other professors commonly do) and for operating my classes in an open-forum manner in which everyone is free to express their ideas, so long as

it is done in an intellectual and critical manner that is grounded within anthropological thinking.

I realize that some of these issues may not pertain to many colleges and universities in the southwest and midwest, where “Chicano” or “Mexican-American” Studies courses predominate and the vast majority of Latino students are of Mexican heritage. However, my conjecture is that the challenges discussed previously will only increase in the coming years at colleges and universities throughout the northeast and other regions as the diversification of the Latino population increases and as growing numbers of Latino students attend higher education, thus prompting colleges and universities to further promote multiculturalism in their curricula through the establishment of Latino Studies courses and degree programs.

Recommended Classroom Exercises

I now shift my focus to share some classroom activities and critical thinking exercises that have proven effective in encouraging both Latino and non-Latino students to “think outside the box” in my courses. I recommend anyone teaching Latino Studies courses, or any class with an ethnically diverse Latino student enrollment, to consider using these exercises in their own classrooms as a means of promoting critical thinking and fostering student participation during class discussion. These exercises are also useful in classes where the instructor is assigned to teach Latino history, identity, culture, or contemporary experiences to a classroom comprised primarily or entirely of non-Latino students.

Exercise #1: Introduction to Latinidad

This exercise is given to students at the beginning of the semester (if the focus of the entire course is on Latinos) or at the beginning of a particular unit that focuses on Latinos if part of a larger course, because its purpose is to make students aware of their pre-existing

knowledge, or lack thereof, regarding Latinos in the United States. The exercise consists of a worksheet with six (6) open-ended questions:

- *How would you define the word “Latino?” Explain what you think this word means. What criteria makes a person “Latino” (such as looks? Physical appearance? Social or cultural characteristics)? Explain in detail.*
- *What are the sources of the knowledge that you have about Latinos? Where do your ideas and information come from? – personal experiences (such as being Latino, living in a Latino neighborhood, attending a largely Latino school), occasional personal encounters, the media, word of mouth from family and friends, educational books and school/college courses, etc?*
- *Name as many key Latino historical figures as you can (either 20th century or earlier).*
- *Name as many Latino figures in U.S. government and politics as you can.*
- *Name as many Latino figures in sports and music as you can.*
- *Identify as many Latino figures in TV/movies, entertainment, and comedy as you can.*

I distribute this worksheet to students during class and instruct them to complete the worksheet to the best of their ability in class, working on this assignment as individuals. Most importantly, I inform students that there are no “right” or “wrong” answers to any of these questions and that the grade for this assignment will be based on effort and original thought. I instruct students to do no outside research while completing the worksheet, which is the primary reason why I have them fill out this worksheet during class by giving them fifteen to twenty minutes to work on this assignment. Afterwards I have students divide themselves into small groups of five or six to discuss and compare/contrast their responses with one another for approximately ten minutes. Following this small group discussion, I facilitate a collective

discussion with the entire class as we go over the responses that students have come up with for each of the questions on the worksheet.

The discussion yields some very interesting and revealing ideas. The first question, pertaining to the definition of Latino and what “makes” someone Latino generates a range of responses, which run the gamut from *physical* characteristics (many non-Latino students tend to assume that all Latinos are bronze-complexioned and have dark black hair) to *cultural* characteristics (the most common response is a reference to Spanish-speaking linguistic ability; sometimes students also invoke *Catholic* religious affiliation or essentialized, stereotyped traits such as *machismo*, loud/flamboyant personalities, or large families) to *geographic* heritage (ancestry from Latin America). As students share their responses, I keep a running tabulation by recording their ideas on the board while refraining from commenting on the responses. This almost always fosters more classroom discussion, as students begin to question or take exception with others’ ideas, as well as raising new questions of their own, such as “Are Brazilians and Spaniards Latino?” The second question (which asks where their knowledge of Latinos comes from) is the most revealing, because it requires students to engage in some critical self-reflection and to analyze their own respective social locations. This has led to several white students coming to the realization that their ideas about Latinos have been shaped by the media, news reports, and hearsay from family and friends and an understanding that this information may not necessarily be accurate. Without fail, students have very few responses for the third and fourth questions. The few names that a few students are able to muster for these questions include Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and perhaps a Spanish conquistador or two from the 16th century. This presents me with an opportunity to further question students on their thoughts as to why persons have no trouble providing answers to the first question, but struggle to such an extent with the third and fourth questions. The

answer, of course, is that Latinos have largely been excluded from mainstream accounts of U.S. history, despite the fact that Mexican Americans have officially been part of the United States since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in the middle of the 19th century, and Puerto Ricans have been U.S. citizens since 1917 following passage of the Jones Act. This general lack of awareness renders Latino studies courses all the more necessary at the collegiate level.

Speaking to these points, William Flores and Rina Benmayor (1-7) refer to traditional, hegemonic mainstream historical accounts of the United States as the “master narrative.” The hallmark of the “master narrative” is that it highlights American exceptionalism, focuses almost exclusively on the experiences and accomplishments of European/white Americans, and largely omits the experiences of non-white peoples from discourses of the nation’s history. Such a narrative of U.S. history consequently constructs whites as the “real Americans” whose experiences and achievements constitute the authentic “American experience” while marginalizing and trivializing those of blacks, Chicanos/Latinos, American Indians, Asians, and other minority groups deemed outside the boundaries of the imagined community of the American nation-state. Latino Studies (and other ethnic studies) courses thus represent extremely valuable teaching and learning occasions by presenting students with opportunities to expand their conceptualization of the United States beyond the traditional confines promoted under the “master narrative.”

Exercise # 2: Pan-Latino Identity

This exercise also consists of a worksheet with open-ended questions, although it probably works best in classes with a large enrollment of Latino students or at least around the midpoint of the semester or beyond in a course that focuses on Latino studies since the exercise requires at least a rudimentary knowledge of pan-ethnicity and a basic awareness of distinct Latino ethnic populations. This worksheet consists of four open-ended questions:

- *How likely do you think a collective pan-Latino identity will develop?*
- *Do you think such a pan-Latino identity already exists? Why or why not?*
- *What factors do you think would help contribute to the development of a pan-Latino collective identity?*
- *What challenges do you think impede the development of a pan-Latino identity?*

As with the worksheet discussed in the prior example, students are given this worksheet in class to complete as individuals for about ten to fifteen minutes. Afterwards, we discuss students' responses as a collective class discussion. Because the nature of the questions in this exercise is much more in-depth and theoretical than those of the previous exercise, those who participate in this discussion tend to be either Latino students themselves or non-Latino students who take a keen interest in Latino identity and affairs due to the fact that I use this exercise primarily in upper-level Latino Studies courses – where the very subject matter tends to attract these types of students. One of the benefits of this activity is that it always yields an extremely fruitful conversation among students who have a vested personal interest in Latino Studies. Opinions and perspectives vary among students regarding the four aforementioned questions, with some more readily embracing of a collective, pan-Latino identity while others are much less enthusiastic at this prospect in favor of retaining their own specific ethnic/national heritage – although students who espouse this latter position still support the idea of coexistence and civility towards other Latino heritages.

From my experiences administering this exercise, the majority of white and African American students – who likely have a passion for Latino issues if they are taking an upper-level course where they would be given this activity – support the idea of a pan-Latino identity, often on the grounds that pan-ethnic identity increases “strength in numbers.” On the other

hand, Latino students have more muddled responses. Some adamantly assert ethnic or nationalistic pride in their respective heritage and only minimally identify as “Latino” because that is how the larger American society views them, while others question whether a pan-Latino unity is even possible, given the contentious identity politics among Latinos in terms of language, culture, immigration/citizenship status, social class, ethno-national background, and other variables. At the very least, this worksheet and the accompanying discussion conveys the often highly emotional and bitterly contested nature of identity politics movements, as well as the negotiation of ethnic and cultural identities.

Conclusion

The opportunity to inspire young students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds to critically contemplate and discuss matters of race, ethnicity, immigration, and cultural diversity is one of the most personally-rewarding experiences of my teaching career. It is also one of the most socially significant and timely challenges that higher education administrators and instructors – particularly those in the social sciences and humanities, whose academic disciplines are heavily rooted in the study of historic and/or contemporary cross-cultural interactions between members of different social groups or analysis of different forms of cross-cultural human expression – currently face. Most colleges and universities openly declare support for multiculturalism and diversity; however the vast differences in social locations that many white and non-white students bring with them into the classroom creates the potential for antagonistic and belligerent exchanges between students, as well as resistance from students, when subject matter pertaining to cultural diversity is incorporated into the curriculum. If used properly, classroom discussions and in-class writing activities can be highly effective as teaching tools to broach potentially sensitive and contentious subject matter, of which Latino studies courses and other social science and humanities disciplines are enmeshed, even on

campuses where the majority of students have had relatively little prior exposure to, or experience with, peoples of color. The primary challenge for higher education today is to alter its paradigmatic approach towards diversity/multiculturalism from merely “celebrating differences” between socially-defined racial and ethnic groups towards teaching students to critically understand the multifaceted dynamics of cultural diversity, intergroup relations, and identity formation processes.

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