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## Where the Rubber Hits the Road Chicano/a Studies and Nurturing Civic Engagement in the classroom

Anna Ochoa O'Leary

University of Arizona, olearya@email.arizona.edu

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TITLE PAGE

Where the Rubber Hits the Road: Chicano/a Studies and Nurturing Civic Engagement  
in the classroom

Anna Ochoa O'Leary, Ph.D.

Mexican American Studies Dept.

César E. Chavez Bldg.  
P.O. Box 210023  
University of Arizona 85721  
Tucson AZ

National Association for Chicana/o Studies (NACCS)  
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ANNA OCHOA O'LEARY, is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Mexican-American Studies at the University of Arizona, in Tucson, Arizona. Her research has focused on issues of education in the U.S. Mexico border region, in particular of Mexican-origin women. She is a 2006-2007 Fulbright Scholar and currently the editor of a two volume encyclopedia on the experiences of undocumented immigrants in the United States.

# Where the Rubber Hits the Road: Chicano/a Studies and Nurturing Civic Engagement in the Classroom

## **Abstract**

Ideas about how marginalized populations become transformed and empowered are salient to Chicano/a Studies. However, while terms like “transformation” and “empowerment” harbor certain allure, the teaching problem lies in translating them into meaningful and tangible benchmarks. This is especially true when teaching Chicano/a Studies subject matter to students who do not identify as Chicanos/as, nor with the community-based struggles that have led to educational reforms. This paper describes how I use the principles inherent in the history of the development of Chicano/a Studies as an academic discipline to try to create wider awareness in the classroom about the relationship between civic engagement and knowledge production. The content of 225 final project papers was systematically examined and selected excerpts illustrate how, when structured by course objectives and activities (such as collaborative learning exercises and service learning), real-life collaborations with community organizations might channel experiences into greater awareness of how knowledge transforms and empowers. In this way, civic engagement is validated and nurtured in the context of general education goals and objectives. These in turn can be nested within the broader politics of the day that threaten to dismantle the educational achievements of the Chicano Movement of the last 40 years.

## Introduction

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Chicano and Chicana students, along with their teachers, families, and other allies organized and rose to protest, among other things, the structured inequality of the U.S. educational system. Largely influenced by the Civil Rights period (1955-1968), voices from these protests helped ignite *El Movimiento*, a national movement that sought political empowerment and social inclusion for Chicanos and Chicanas. El Movimiento was particularly strong at the college level, where there was a large concentration of student activists who formed student organizations, advocated for educational reforms and Chicano Studies curriculums, and initiated a Chicano nationalist agenda. Although student unrest did not start until the 1960s, the demographic changes within institutions of higher education had long been developing. The 1960s thus brought to the fore a heightened sense of national diversity and a critical look at the relationship between communities of color to those institutions (Johnston 1998). Subsequently, the establishment of black studies programs emerged, and became a model used by post-secondary institutions to establish curricula that was relevant (Reuben 1998). Similarly, many Chicano and Chicana students involved in El Movimiento went on to bring about Chicano/a Studies programs throughout U.S. colleges and universities. Nearly forty years later, nearly 400 departments, programs, centers and institutes have become dedicated in whole or in part to the formal academic study of Chicanos and Chicanas according to the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies website ([www.nacccs.org](http://www.nacccs.org)).

For most students currently entering post-secondary education institutions, El Movimiento is little studied outside classes that specifically focus on topics related to the history and culture of Chicanos/as or Mexican Americans. This is one of several reasons that the banning of ethnic studies in public schools in Arizona is in 2011 so devastating (O'Leary and Romero 2011; 2012). Without this history, students will be less aware of the movement's most enduring legacy: the establishment of Chicano Studies as an academic field. Indeed, Chicana/o Studies<sup>1</sup> today provides scholars the academic communities needed to advance the

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<sup>1</sup> Unless the authors specify "Chicano" Studies in their texts, I will use "Chicano/a Studies" to refer to the field that has progressively grown sensitive to Spanish language conventions that systematically privilege the masculine subject forms over the feminine, and mindful that "Chicana Studies" may constitute a distinct discipline altogether.

research and teaching agendas important to Chicanas and Chicanos. The implications of this institutional infrastructure are far-reaching. Over the years, Chicana/o Studies scholars have actively engaged in broader academic debates about epistemology, methods, and approaches—discussions that not only contribute to the broader academic arena, but are essential to our ability to historicize the discipline’s development: from the Civil Rights Period of social and political unrest to the present.

Many Chicano/a Studies introductory classes adopt a topical approach to expose students to the issues that face (or have faced) Mexican American populations. However, a slightly different approach is to use, as I have, a collection of articles written by Chicano and Chicana scholars that assess the discipline and reflect upon its history, direction, and subjectivity. Through these articles, students can examine the discipline’s “odyssey,” borrowing the concept from Jiménez and Chin (2000), and analyze how the field has developed and how it has contributed to a wider dialogue through which the powerless and marginalized become politically engaged (Soldatenko 2009). Civic engagement activity is mediated and nurtured through this dialogue and in this way, service learning can provide students with complementarily meaningful experiences, in places—as the popular saying goes—where the rubber meets the road. In addition to highlighting important principles that are fundamental to this country’s framework for democracy, the benefit of civic engagement has broader implications for the health and well being of youth by building self esteem. This in turn provides them the tools for coping with the public discourse that demeans their ethnicity (O’Leary and Romero 2011).

### *The Intellectualized Context*

The selection of readings emerged from several years of teaching the course: “Overview of Mexican-American Studies” (MAS 265) at the University of Arizona. MAS 265 is a lower-division general education course that critically examines major issues and trends in Mexican-American and Chicano/a Studies scholarship. My challenge in teaching this course has been to make it meaningful to a diverse body of students, most of who are *not* Chicanos/as nor minorities, and most of whom were born *after* the Civil Rights period. My decision to focus on the discipline’s subjectivity was motivated by the valuable lessons in inherent in the history of Civil Rights and by the idea that the discipline’s emergence and development is

fundamentally an exercise in democracy. By focusing on the discipline's subjectivity, I aim to convey the idea that unlike other disciplines, civic participation has been critical to its formation and development. Moreover, in today's political context, civic participation is ever more crucial to promoting awareness and a voice on matters that concern us all. From this standpoint, I fall squarely into the category of "teacher activist" as described by Montañó and Burstein (2006, p. 31). Teacher-activists deliberately engage in "strategies that develop the collective consciousness of their students."

The University of Arizona is in the border region city of Tucson, Arizona, which enjoys a relatively politically progressive climate and many opportunities to join community based organizations with social justice causes. Like the teacher activists in the Montañó and Burstein study, I too have chosen the educational arena as an extension of my activism, a site where I can teach students about the social issues that lie just beyond the university's walls. As a teacher activist, I struggle to make political ideals less abstract while addressing the curricular mandates that are often idealistic, yet somehow insular. I reason that if students understand the democratic principals upon which the discipline rests, they will also have internalized the ideals that will make civic participation applicable to a wide range of situations, and hopefully a life-long endeavor. By making the connection between civic participation and coursework deliberate, bridges are constructed between ideals and practice and between production of knowledge and the political processes that drive democracy.

The reading materials I use thus serve two needs. First, the articles give students the opportunity to examine topics and issues that under gird the development of the field, Chicano/a Studies. The articles provide a history of the discipline and a framework for understanding emergent scholarly debates about epistemology, methods, philosophies, approaches, and relevant social issues that underlie research and advanced the field. Secondly, the articles provide a foundation for analyzing the relationship between academia and civic participation, and the transformative qualities each imparts upon the other. By design, Chicano/a Studies is *engaged scholarship*, that is, knowledge at the service of communities. Thus the readings offer insight to how scholars conceive of and articulate the linkages between knowledge and how knowledge is applied. These connections can then be understood as having three epistemological concerns:

- a) How knowledge is produced (e.g. through research and publications)
- b) How knowledge is transferred or transmitted (through formal teaching and/or informal social communication)
- c) How knowledge transforms (individuals, politics, places, or policies).

This articulation, in turn, provides the basis for a wider understanding of the value of community studies and participatory action research that has been the mainstay of much of Chicano/a Studies research. In my class, the readings also provide the rationale for highlighting collaborative learning strategies in the classroom. In this way, it provides the reasoning for engaging in service-learning projects that structure students' collaboration in social justice organizations somewhere out in the community.

### **From classroom to community: The Odyssey begins**

Students begin by becoming familiar with some of the intellectual roots of Chicano/a Studies. We begin with a sample of works written by foundational scholars such as Octavio Romano, George I Sanchez, Julian Samora, César Chávez, and Mirta Vidal. A selection of works by this early generation of scholar/activists is indicative of the philosophies and approaches that The Movement would initially adopt. Their work ultimately brought to the forefront of the nation's consciousness a number of issues affecting Mexican-American communities due to structured disadvantages, such as unequal access to educational and economic opportunities, political disenfranchisement, racism, and ethnocentrism. We then proceed to a selection of articles that emerged after the discipline was formally integrated into curricula throughout post-secondary institutions in the U.S. Here we read about how Chicano and Chicana scholars struggled for space, voice, and acceptance within academia. The struggle can be thus seen as emerging from the demands of Chicano students and their allies, who achieved notable gains in the area of education reform during the 1970s and 1980. We discuss Chicano/a scholars' concerns about the fate of the newly emergent discipline in light of a primarily unwelcoming academic environment. They point out the strains placed on a disparately small number of Chicano/a scholars in academia, and the pressures added by the field's characteristically interdisciplinary nature.

Later articles focus on emergent critiques of the discipline as scholars began to express doubts about the initial goals that had guided early Chicano/a Studies scholarship. Targets of this critique, among other things, were the discipline's reliance on social science methodologies and male-dominated perspectives, the Western bias in conventional analyses of culture, and the concept of Chicano Cultural Nationalism (Soldatenko 2009). The sample of critiques that students are exposed to largely question the discipline's ability to effectively challenge the dominant paradigms of academia. These serve as a background for the final articles in which more recent contemporary critiques are formulated, and where epistemologies informed by updated views of culture, race, ethnicity, and transnationalism help reformulate the older. In light of present political debates about national borders and immigration reform, the more current articles bring the discipline's trajectory full circle in terms of its focus on the roots of social divisions based gender, race, ethnicity, and/or class. It is my contention that because of the traditional concern for the historical roots of discrimination, Chicano/a studies and its scholars are better positioned vis-à-vis other disciplines to contend with our increasingly globalized environment. The trajectory of collective action in the age of globalization is yet uncertain. This is in part because the power relationships that sustain existing social structures very often assail collective action. Nowhere is this more clear than the recent assault on ethnic studies curricula in Arizona, where the learning about the value of such collective perspective has been demonized, resulting in the termination of ethnic studies programs in the Tucson Unified School District (O'Leary and Romero 2011, O'Leary, Romero, Cabrera and Rascon 2012), in a time when such perspectives should be historicized and practiced.

### **Bridging Ideals and Practice with a Collaborative Learning<sup>2</sup> and Service Learning**

We begin by recognizing that humans are inherently social creatures. The history of the Chicano Movement already illustrates an important lesson on how culture as a unifying force was activated to challenge the unequal access to education. Often marching to the rhythm of the now-famous chant: “¡El

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<sup>2</sup> Changes from a traditional lecture format to informal small group format were inspired by workshops by the University of Arizona's Teaching Teams program, and facilitated by a curriculum improvement grant awarded through the Einstein's Protégés/Turning Information into Knowledge Program in June of 2005.

*Pueblo Unido, jamás será vencido!*” (“The people united, will never be defeated!”), the Movement embodied an ideology of social solidarity that succeeded, to a large degree, in improving the Chicano/a condition on a variety of fronts. To begin, movement activists and scholars demanded from learning institutions more truthful representations of Chicano/a histories and cultures; and by the 1970s, the idea of incorporating a student’s cultural heritage in the curriculum became more acceptable. To be sure, other collective mobilizations of the period—of blacks, Native Americans, and women—also succeeded in bringing about educational reforms and new curricula which ultimately benefited stakeholder communities, and resulting in African-American Studies, Native American Studies, and Women’s Studies.

The Chicano Studies “odyssey” thus spans decades, and parallels important changes in the formulation of political approaches to issues of marginalization of all types. By definition, movement implies change, and change is facilitated by agents who, through a variety of forms, pass on perspectives, vocabularies or knowledge to others. These in turn, inculcate others so that the movement ‘moves’ towards a widening sphere of influence (Crossly 2005, p. 22). In its classical form (up until about the 1960s), social movements centered on mobilizing labor against capital to contest issues of unequal resource distribution (Wieviorka 2005). True to this form, El Movimiento’s formative period can be traced to the labor-management struggles of the farm-worker organizing movement, and the organization of the United Farm Workers union (UFW) led by César Chavez and Dolores Huerta. A class struggle analysis such as the “internal colonialism” paradigm advanced by Mario Barrera (1979) was valuable for understanding racial and economic constructs and for explaining how these structured an already economically disadvantaged Mexican-American “underclass” (Acuña 1988). This analysis, however, did little to transform the contentious and asymmetrical relationship between labor and capital (Soto 2006). In fact in many cases, workers affirmed the structural asymmetry of capital and labor by accepting unfair and harsh working conditions or the artificial divisions of working classes. Few worker organizations were equipped with the theoretical framework to struggle effectively on behalf of the working classes which was, as it is now, transnational, multilingual, and encompassing a wide range of actors including foreign and native-born citizens, legal residents, guest workers, and undocumented immigrants. Neither the UFW nor other Chicano

movement organizations took up the politically contentious issues of migration, immigrant workers, and the growth of communities with global connections. In fact, undocumented migrant workers were seen as potential or actual strikebreakers by the UFW, and members and organizers would often report undocumented workers to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) officials during their organizing work in the fields (Garcia 2002). In this way, the labor movement was hobbled by a nation-state framework. However, it is worth noting that far-sighted Mexican and Mexican American labor activists and scholars, such as Ernesto Galarza, adopted internationalist perspectives. During the 1930s, the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) enjoyed limited success in organizing both U.S. and Mexican union workers (Gómez-Quiñonez 1994). In addition, between 1968-1978, the *Centro de Acción Social Autónomo-Hermandad General de Trabajadores (CASA-HGT)*/the Center for Autonomous Social Action-General Brotherhood of Workers, evolved from a traditional *mutualista* (a mutual aid society) to an organization that provided legal and other services as part of larger efforts to organize undocumented Mexican workers in California. In this way, they articulated collective action that was international in scope (Garcia 2002). However, because these labor politics were based on third world Marxist-Leninist revolutionary theories that tended to side-line issues of race, ethnicity, and gender, the working class analysis proved to be poorly prepared to respond to the challenges of globalization and the devastating effects that economic restructuring would have on less developed nations by fueling the movement of impoverished workers across international boundaries in search of economic opportunities (O'Leary and Sanchez 2012).

The institutionalization of multicultural education ultimately helped the wider society recognize that there were cultural differences between groups and that with increased understanding of these cultures, we could expect a more learned, diverse, and increasingly tolerant society. When I look across a modern university classroom and see diversity, I am grateful for idea and practice of making education more accessible to racialized, ethnic, and linguistic minority students (Tanemura Morelli and Spencer 2000). Moreover, with the normalization of multiculturalism, educational practitioners and theorists were able to reconsider conventional teaching methods premised on individual competitiveness and move towards models of instruction that complimented human tendencies to cooperate. These new models of instruction, premised

on the value of collaborative learning or cooperative learning techniques hold viable alternatives to efforts to make education an individualized endeavor (O’Leary 2005). Indeed, the dominance of individualism and competition have been increasingly regarded many educators as an extension of corporate organization that has disrupted the human tendency to cooperate, and to treat each other with compassion to achieve a greater good (Cammarotta and Romero 2009).

A refocus on a history of collective action thus provides the foundation for not only validating a collaborative approach to problem solving, but also for multicultural education. It also provides an intellectual foundation upon which collaborative learning activities in the classroom can take place. The sense of social solidarity that a collaborative approach promotes builds bonds of mutual trust between individuals and humanizes resource exchange. For women, especially, evidence shows that chances for attaining educational goals are improved by relying on the existent cultural mechanisms, such as social networking, that facilitate and promote collaborative and cooperative practices (O’Leary 2006). This framework validates culture as context for action, as well as a source of meaningful topics that students can draw from for classroom learning, “funds of knowledge.” A “funds of knowledge” approach seeks to document and integrate community forms of knowledge into the curriculum (González, Moll, and Amanti 2005). The community forms of knowledge are then used to enhance curricula by making it more meaningful for ethnic or language minority children. In this approach, culture is seen as living, undermining the conventional uses of static and often contrived cultural artifacts (e.g. folklore, music), “a relic to hang on the bulletin board” (Delgado-Gaitan 2001, 147) to teach students about culture. The intersection of schooling, culture, and collective action offers a context in which culturally-relevant topics may be experienced, but is still underused (O’Leary 2005). In a perspective that follows the principles advanced by Paulo Freire (2002), a collaborative culture, or the creation of micro learning communities within the classroom can serve to promote the consciousness-raising that is useful for generating knowledge that can serve less-advantaged communities (Delgado-Gaitan 2001; Friere 2000 [1970], Villalpando 2003). Hence, the in-class collaborative exercises in the course are designed to bolster the intersection of schooling, culture, and collective action.

Important features of collaborative learning are that (1) it is deliberate by design and (2) that learning activities are structured to promote it. To this end, students work on assignments collectively in the classroom. The instructor's role is primarily active in the sense that she assures that the two features are present (Barkley, Cross, and Major 2005). For example, the questions and exercises that follow each article in the reader, *Chicano Studies: The Discipline and its Journey* (identifying reference omitted) are designed for in-class, informal small-group work. The collaborative process that is encouraged is intended to alleviate the lack of connection often found between course objectives or learning objectives with the process by which students acquire the necessary academic skills and knowledge (critical competencies) to effectively achieve the objectives. Using small groups within larger classes is also an important strategy for effective learning because it diminishes feelings of anonymity known to alienate students. Cooper and Robinson (2000) point out the utility of small groups for engaging students as they learn from each other and makes for a more productive learning experience. The informal small-group activities help engage students with the readings, and by creating a social environment that promotes cooperation in achieving learning objectives, give them confidence.

The third and final feature of collaborative learning, and perhaps the most difficult to insure, is that the small-group assignments are meaningful to the participants. It is more difficult in general education classes where students come from a wide range of social backgrounds and disciplinary interests. Conventionally, meaningfulness might be also achieved (albeit artificially) by generating knowledge that they expect to be tested on. However, students should understand that through their collaboration and group discussions, they are producing knowledge and responsible for making connections between course content and their realities. In this light, meaningfulness might be also achieved by relating course content with personal experiences, before being tested over course content. To foster greater awareness of the process, students might be asked questions about their small-group experiences in short surveys during or after their small group encounter:

- How prepared were you to contribute to the group discussion?
- In your opinion, how prepared were the others in your group?

- List up to five things that contribute to a productive group discussion.

These questions can be used to generate short essays (either individually or collectively) and for further discussion and analysis of the small-group experience, making it a conscious act of reflection.

The collaborative experience can be viewed as a prelude to collaborating in the real world and can be used to satisfy the goals of general education, which are often lofty and ambitious. For example, at the University of Arizona general education courses are designed to accomplish several goals, the first of which is to “afford students the opportunity *to learn how different disciplines define, acquire and organize knowledge* [emphasis added].” Other notable objectives are “to provide a basis for an examination of values” and to develop analytic skills useful for “lifelong learning.” The experiences of general education at the University of Arizona are intended to encourage students to develop a

[...]critical and inquiring attitude, an appreciation of complexity and ambiguity, a tolerance for and empathy with persons of different backgrounds or values and a deepened sense of self. In short, the goal of the general education program is to prepare students to respond more fully and effectively to an increasingly complex world (<http://web.arizona.edu/~uge/gened/nutshell.htm>).

A cultivated sensitivity to these valuable (although rather abstract) objectives can be developed through small group work and a service learning project that includes reflection. Various articles used in the course provide the modeling that promotes reflection. The articles that students read towards the end of the course further illustrate trends towards the use of reflection as a learning tool. The knowledge derived from these methods is personal and socially and historically contingent. There is no claim to truth but rather that there are alternative explanations to the information obtained from the so-called objective and detached scientific analysis of social phenomenon. To describe the pain of marginalization, for example, Chicana/o scholars use individual narratives to demonstrate how it impacts on affected individuals. Adalberto Aguirre’s “The Personal Narrative as Academic Storytelling: a Chicano’s Search for Presence and Voice in Academe” (Aguirre 2005) and Macias’ “El Grito en Aztlán: Voice and Presence in Chicana/o Studies” (Macias 2005) illustrates how Chicano/a scholars are marginalized and silenced in the academy by processes that are

assumed to be rational and unbiased by racism. Until assumptions are critically analyzed, they remain hidden. A critical awareness of the fallacies inherent the logic upon which opportunities are structured has the potential to inspire actions to change them. In the process, individuals are also potentially transformed. This process is illustrated by Alfredo A Mirandé's "I Never had a Mentor: Reflections of a Chicano Sociologist" (Mirandé 1988) and Anna Sandoval's, "Building Up Our Resistance: Chicanas in Academia" (Sandoval 1999). These works exemplify the power of the small narrative. "Testimonios" such as the one by Yolanda Chávez Leyva in "There is a Great Good in Returning" is similar to Mirandé's and Sandoval's as it focuses on personal sites—"epistemologies of place"—where both critical reflection and social analysis takes place. The process recovers the stories that have been buried in the metanarratives of nation-states and help the trauma that people of color have historically suffered. In so doing, they recover histories of agency and resistance to oppression. Such narratives demystify the knowledge production process by teaching students that knowledge production is not an independent undertaking but rooted in particular histories and experiences. From this concept, it becomes easier to also locate themselves in particular histories and experiences. In this way they become engaged with the contradictions and the matanarratives of modernity. In postmodern analysis, negotiating contradictions is key to destabilizing modernity's oppressive systems, resulting in more individual freedom. At this point, students should readily embrace the power of small narratives that are always situational and provisional (Klages 2006). Because these are introspective, students can address their individualized understanding—of the readings, of the group activity, or of other real-life situations.

A service learning project (see Appendix A) was used to help students develop sensitivity about less privileged communities. Students select an organizations elected using the criteria. Used together with reflection exercises, service learning is an effective teaching and learning method that engages students in civic participation activities (Eyler 2002). One of the key objectives of reflection is to connect service learning activities with coursework. A series of reflection exercises were used to prepare students to observe and participate in a community organization setting, and to help them see the relevance of the service to their coursework. This is important because for many the service learning experience may be a first. It also fosters

communication between students, the instructor, and community partners. Eyler (2002, p. 517) argues eloquently for the use of techniques that promote reflection as an educational tool. She writes:

“...there is evidence to suggest that service learning programs which thorough integrate service and academic learning through continuous reflection promote the development of the knowledge, skills, and cognitive capacities necessary for students to deal effectively with complex social issues that challenge citizens. There is evidence to suggest that With a service learning project, students develop a deepened sense of self, their learning, and their role in society.

A wide range of opportunities to engage with community organization allow students to apply their knowledge about collaboration in areas not directly related to Chicano/a Studies. This accommodates related interests and allows students to achieve both personal and academic goals (Eyler 2002). Finally, as scholars, students can critically examine the relationship between knowledge and action, perhaps even discover otherwise unrecognized forms of action. This may lead to alternative ideas, beliefs, and practices that are key to solving social problems in the real world.

### **Reflecting on Real World Collaborations**

A service learning assignment was incorporated into MAS 265 beginning in the spring semester of 2005. I was refined in subsequent semesters. For their final paper, students reported on their activities. They were required to reflect on the activity's outcome, their participation, and experiences. It is difficult to assess the impact of service learning on students (Eyler 2002). Some empirical studies seem to confirm theories of learning that pose the benefit of reflection on learning. These studies suggest that effective service learning is enhanced by continuous reflection activities and cultivate students' attitudes and cognitive skills that can lead to greater social responsibility, greater civic participation, and responses to social problems (Eyler 2002, p. 518). Following these, structured reflection exercises were incorporated through the semester to help students prepare for their final reflection. Generally, students' comments about their learning service experiences are positive. However, it was not uncommon for students to describe the problems they encountered or to find complaints against organizations, people, time constraints, or the process, but only

three students reflected negatively on their experience in their final report. A total of 10 students for 2005-2008 did not complete the assignment.

Mindful of how “transformation” and “empowerment” might be manifested, the content of students’ reflections was examined. From these, the learning outcomes that were being achieved were identified and categorized (Table 1). Although many of these categories overlapped, special attention was placed on indicators that “transformation and “empowerment, was taking place. The definition and ultimate refinement of these and other major categories of learning outcomes were in this way inductively established. Except for the “Poor Reflection” and “Reflection Absent” categories which are inconclusive, all the other categories are positive learning outcomes. The final scale used for coding in Table 1 thus represents categories into which student reflections were placed and ordered by a hierarchical scheme that flowed downward from the presumptively more desirable qualities of learning—transformation or empowerment—because these demonstrate a higher level of awareness about the learning process and their connection to the objectives that Chicano/a Studies curricula profess to achieve. The difference between these two top level categories is qualitative, with “Transformation” conceived of as an indication of having transcended perceived limitations. A total of 225 papers were examined and coded accordingly.

**Table 1: Service Learning Outcome Scale**

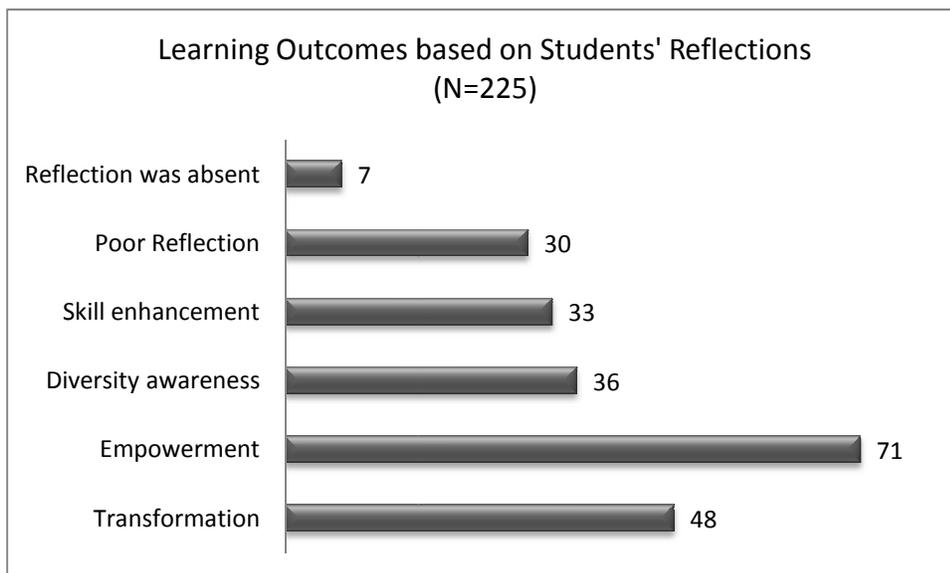
Rank	Concept	Description
5	Transformation	Students express awareness of their transformation, perhaps by having overcome challenges, anxieties, or preconceived notions. Knowledge was acquired experientially.
4	Empowerment	Contributions to the organization or project provided much validation for students and therefore, enabled further growth, fostered new visions, or even leadership development.
3	Diversity awareness	Student learns more about his/herself (personal growth) in relation to others who are different
2	Skill enhancement	Student describes (somewhat mechanically) about what he/she learned, what was accomplished, or how challenges were met
1	Poor reflection	The reflection lacks subjectivity and little awareness about what was learned or about the broader ramifications of their participation

0	Reflection absent	Student omitted any reflection
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The outcome of this coding process is summarized in Figure 1, showing evidence of transformation and empowerment taking place among students taking MAS 265 for the years 2005-2008. However, it should be noted that the organization that most benefited from the service learning project was the University's MEChA, with a total of 60 students participating in this organization in the years of the service learning project. Therefore, because this organization deliberately aims to raise students' consciousness, the results should be evaluated with circumspect. In addition, MEChA conveniently holds meetings on campus and just doors away from where MAS 265 convenes. It is also quite plausible that after introducing MEChA as a discussion topic and explored through readings in class, students' curiosity about the organization may be piqued. Regardless, the desired outcome for both the class and the student organization is achieved.

In the four years (2005-2008) that the course was taught using the service learning component, there was a slight but upwards trend in terms achieving the more desired qualities of learning. I attribute this improvement to the development of a textbook based on framework for the class and previously described, and the sustained efforts to improve the methods by which reflection is gradually introduced to student in the course of the semester.

Figure 1: Distribution of coding scores



## Discussion

### *Transformation*

Transformation can be described as change. In the students' narratives, there were many that described heightened awareness of their learning. In many cases, students discussed how they had overcome attitudinal challenges to complete the assignment, procrastination, resentment, foot-dragging, anxieties about moving out of their comfort zone, or being hindered by preconceived notions about the organization or people that they were expected to reach out to. Many students remarked about how the knowledge that they had acquired as a result of the service learning, could not have been achieved in the classroom. In other words, the knowledge was acquired experientially and they were conscious of it. For example, David, a second year cultural resource management major, participated for the first time in service learning by helping tutor Latino children in a south side Tucson neighborhood. Tucson's south side population is predominantly of Mexican-origin. His organization asked him to come up with ideas for a project that could be done by the students. He found this task difficult because he had never been assigned anything like this before. He writes

*I thought about it all day and nothing clicked until one day I was driving to a friend's house on the north side of town and saw an elementary school that had a playhouse located by the playground. I ran the idea by the teachers and they thought it was a terrific idea and encouraged me to pursue this goal. I went to a nearby Home Depot and spoke with a very helpful employee who gave me all the information I needed. We set up an appointment for an employee to come out and do the correct measurements and get the necessary supplies needed for the job. After a few days, the supplies were delivered and moved by the location the playhouse was to be constructed. My next task was to get volunteers to help set the playhouse up, so I made fliers for the children to take home to their parents so they might want to help. I was astonished by how many parents were willing to help me build this. The next day we started and by the end of the week it was finished. I was so proud of myself and all the parents who helped me construct this for the children...Before I came to the school, I never really paid too much attention to the issues surrounding bilingual education. A lot of these children hardly*

*know English and seemed very scared and confused learning in the classroom. I feel that the project ...made those students feel more welcomed at school and will help them interact more with the other children in their classroom.*

Like David, sophomore student, George, engaged in a community organization for a first time experience.

*“[M]y time at the boys and Girls Club has honestly been a unique experience. Unique in many different ways, as this is the first time I have ever been involved with a community service project and distinctive because of the work I did with the Chicano youth. This learning service project was not what I believed it was going to be because when I began this process my objective was honestly to get information I need to write this paper and get it over with as soon as possible. However, as time went on and I became more familiar with the youth and activities involved, ...this Boys and Girls Club service learning project became less of a chore. Eventually, I appreciated ...[the] kids and teenagers I worked with....I was more impressed with people that are consistently involved with the Boys and Girls Club and programs... like the Keystone Service Club. .. Being that the Boys and girls Club keeps these children and teenagers out of trouble and off the streets of the Southside of Tucson<sup>3</sup> ...I am secure in stating that these youth are at risk in this part of town because it was not too long ago that I was in their shoes, being that I was born and raised in the heart of the Southside of Tucson. The community service project reminded me of how much I am blessed and in considering my position in life now in comparison of what it could have been if I had taken a ‘different road’ as a young kid or teenager. Overall, I am proud that I might have the slightest influence on the development of at-risk minorities and helping them make the right decision for their future.*

Given these testimonials, I submit that with service learning projects such as the one described in the appendix, the possibilities for transforming our social and political environment are enhanced. The above

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<sup>3</sup> Tucson’s south side is where much of the Chicano community live, and as such, suffers from the neglect of city planners resulting in a higher rate of crime and gang activity relative to the rest of the Tucson metropolitan area.

narratives are indicative of the knowledge and deep understanding that comes from the self assessment of experiences through the reflective process (Eyler 2002, p. 520).

### *Empowerment*

Empowerment connotes agency and enabling. Typical narratives that were coded as such provided evidence that the service learning activity, organization, or project validated students in a variety of ways: from making them feel important within the larger, collective enterprise and/or by nurturing quiet ambitions and new possibilities and potentialities for growth. It was common to find students describing themselves as often reluctant leaders, but encouraged to develop new goals and visions for themselves. For example, Stacy, a second-year English major, was one of many students who were already familiar with the volunteering experience. She participated in building a home with Habitat for Humanity in the Women Build Program, a program where women build homes for other less fortunate women. She describes her experience of learning to use a hammer correctly, the “five nail stud system,” then later learning to put up drywall, which she described as “a lot of fun.” She described spackling as a “perfectionist’s dream come true” and allowed her to leave feeling “proud and accomplished”:

*I felt as if I had actually had the opportunity to play a small part in a great role. I've volunteered before for other things, but never have I walked away with a feeling of awe and admiration for these people who volunteer daily and love every moment of it.”*

The following account conveys similar sentiments, and illustrates the sense of worth that comes when one’s efforts are validated and respected. Kimberly participated in a trip to Mexicali, Baja California, on the U.S. Mexico border as part of the Newman’s Center’s Alternative Spring Break program. She reported somewhat surprised that the organizers of the trip relied on the students’ input and listened to what they had to say about the schedule. The trip aimed to provide a hands-on learning experience for students to learn about border issues by starting up an after school program and delivering humanitarian aid. She states:

*Personally I think I underwent more change than the children or people of Mexicali did: it truly was a reverse missionary....I also enjoyed the fact that I was chosen to speak to the kids in*

*Spanish....I had been the best Spanish speaker in my group and I verbally informed the kids what events we had planned for them each day. It was a thrill to know that these children respected and listened to me, calling me “professora.” I received an adrenaline rush speaking in front of the multitude of children.*

### **Final Thoughts: Service Learning, Activism, and the Contemporary Context**

With a service learning project, the movement politics that brought forth the establishment of Chicano/a Studies programs throughout the U.S. finds new outlets for contesting systemic disparities. It may very well be the postmodern answer to oppressive forces that structure advantage for some groups at the expense of others. In 2005, a new unrest was palpable with comprehensive immigration reform in the air. Accounts of students participating in organized demonstration and marches were abundant. One student participating in a Chicano Teatro performance for his group stated:

*“This play comes a perfect time in which there are huge problems with the border issue involving people crossing and working without a green card or proper identification. This aspect in society along with this play exemplifies how much strife and persecution these people have gone through.*

A particular moving account came from Stephanie, who struggled the better part of the semester to find an organization that she could connect with. Troubled by this self reported “failure” and a self-characterized misfit identity as a Hispanic “sell-out”, her essay was fittingly titled, “*Learning how to be Chicana: How my Community Activism Project Taught me More than I Expected.*” In her essay, she recalls being awakened by the call to action by her mother, who informs her of a legislative bill<sup>4</sup>

*...that was about to change the lives of millions of people in the United States, including millions of Mexican immigrants and their families and friends. She [her mother] mentioned how*

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<sup>4</sup> Presumably, this refers to U.S. House Bill 4437, the *Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005*, a landmark measure that mandated as greater restriction in the path to citizenship for nearly 12 million undocumented immigrants, greater criminalization of undocumented people, and increased border security infrastructure along the U.S-Mexico border. Although the bill did not pass, the response by immigrants and their allies has been categorized by many as the largest civic mobilization since the Civil Rights period.

*this news could shatter the world that I live in and change how members of my own family as well as members of my community live as well. I felt that this was my call...*

She proceeded to call the Coalición de Derechos Humanos, a immigrant rights organization in Tucson to get involved. She participated in the immigrant rights march where she saw:

*...peacekeepers who were “mainly students ranging from high school to college-aged... So were the students who first walked out in previous weeks from the local high schools and even middle schools. This s a reoccurring theme in the development of Chicano/a culture...*

She concludes by reflecting that

*The day of the march, I felt completely different than I ever have before. I was there with my mother aunt sisters, cousins, friends and co-workers. ... I walked to the front with one of my youger sisters, who like Maria Montoya [the Chicana scholar] describes in her article, was probably too young to understand what was really going on but will remember this experience forever (Montoya 2000, 289). ... I was overwhelmingly proud to be Chicana. I felt like I understood what it feels like to be part of something that defined my culture before I was born. It felt good to be part of the future....*

Perhaps what contemporary social environments lacks is not so much as theoretical clarity about what is necessary to improve the quality or sustainability of democracy, as more connectedness between individuals and communities, and more connectedness between thought and action. In this sense, Chicano/a Studies is positioned to lead us closer, not further away, from realizing a more just and tolerant society.

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## Appendix A

### The Service Learning Project

#### Introduction

In recent years, service-learning has gained popularity among educators and policy makers who have embraced it as a means to bring about positive social change. In following this vision of social change, two major goals have been pursued: (1) to increase the number of students engaged in service-learning and (2) to assure an ethical and effective service-learning experience for all those involved in the service-learning process. However, to assume that the attainment of these two goals will naturally occur might be shortsighted so a third goal of the service-learning movement should be the consistent exploration (and re-exploration) of the philosophy and meaning of service, which can be enabled through structured reflection. In this way, service-learning strikes a balance between direct service (voluntarism, activism) and reflection. During the semester, students will have other opportunities to reflect upon their service learning experience by way of in-class “minute essays” and in-group discussions. These in-class exercises will help students formulate the “discussion and reflection” section of the final report (No. 5 below).

#### Objectives:

1. To develop insight into the world of community organizing that was instrumental in the Chicano Movement, which has influenced public policy in a number of areas.
2. To gain experience in and reflect upon the processes by which communities respond both practically and politically to issues that are often only read about.

#### Process for completing this project is as follows:

1. Students are to review the social justice organizations from the list that is provided by the instructor, or search the internet, nearby communities, or your university for community organizations that might be of interest. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> week of the semester, during the regularly scheduled class meeting, students will be asked to make a selection.

2. Students will attend *at least* three meetings of their selected organization over the course of the semester. Have a group leader verify student's attendance on a signature card.
3. Students will assist in the planning of at least one activity or event organized by their selected organization.
4. Students will write a 7-8 page report discussing the experience (see below for report content). In the report, students will describe their organization, the event the student helped plan, make connections to the course readings, and reflect on their experience.

### **Report Contents and Suggested Lengths**

1. Describe the group including what social justice issue it addresses. (1 paragraph)
2. Describe the activity that you helped organize (Include your explanation for how it addresses the social problem. (1-2 paragraphs)  
  
NOTE: Participation is defined by *what the student did to help organize the activity*. This is not the same as *attending* meetings or *attending* an event. Examples of participation include but are not limited to the following: tutoring, distributing or designing posters, registering voters, transporting supplies to an event, tabling, organizing files, telephone banking.
3. Make connections with the class materials. Discuss how your participation *specifically* connects with any of the issues introduced by the readings. Make sure you refer to the authors and what they say about the issue (about 4 pages).
4. Describe the outcome of the event or activity that the student helped organize and your thoughts about this outcome. (1 paragraph)
5. Discuss and reflect upon your participation in the service-learning project. This is different from item 2 above which focuses in on the event itself. This part should give details about what your experience was (about ½ to 1 page).
6. Before handing in the report, students must staple a note card with the organization's contact person's signature/initials that verifies attendance at meetings.
7. For ease in organization and readability, use subheadings that follow elements 1-5 above.