

## NARRATIVES AS A MEANS TO SUPPORT LATINO/A STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

*This paper presents a culturally grounded approach that supports Latino students entry into the university. A narrative approach, its links the students cultural legacy and their college experience, and their home and the outside world. Narrative fiction is used as a teaching tool to validate and develop the students' knowledge and transform the college culture. A case study illustrates how the approach was used in a Midwestern college. A summary of ethnographic and outcome data is presented to show the impact of the approach on the participants. Implications for social work education and other helping professions are drawn.*

by  
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### THE CONTEXT

College education in the United States is a rite of passage for students which can ease the transition from home/youth to worldliness/adulthood. Going to college and succeeding in it, does not occur in an imaginative vacuum. Myths, lore, and the artifacts of Latino families often create the emotional and imaginative context for the college novice. The prank that made uncle's graduating class a legend in its own time; the trunk in the attic that went to college along with grandfather; and the mother who almost went to college, but was derailed by a prejudiced counselor, serve to inform the imagination of the young person.

Unfortunately, the web of narratives that connect home and college for the vast majority of students, is absent for the Latino student, an absence that is not easily identified. The network of narratives that defines "what is" for most college youth, although powerful, is invisible, and its very invisibility erases the markers in the narrative void experienced by the Latino youth. Nothing seems to be missing.

Many demographic factors determine the imagined proximity of people to college, and the Latino population itself is far from homogeneous in this regard. The status of being an "internally colonized population" (Blauner, 1972) with a cultural and linguistic tradition of its own, is a shared condition for many Latinos in the United States in general, and for Latino college students in particular. Under this condition, the college experience has a quality of alienation/separation in which home and culture are negated. For example, Latino students tell us how they have to "explain themselves" to their non-Latino classmates and instructors. They often use phrases such as: "not belonging," "being alone," and "feeling as a guest" to describe their lack of connection with higher education institutions.

Latino student's culture/language tends to be perceived, and represented as exotic/primitive, and in need of redemption. Certainly, not a language in which college stories are told, nor one in which thought and creativity could be embedded. Latino students often internalize this negative perception, and

when they reach into their knapsack of sustaining and relevant stories, they often sense its emptiness. The old stories in which they used to be the central character do not translate in the college culture. Those stories enter a state of hibernation, and they may remain so if opportunities for their awakening are unavailable.

### FOUNDATIONS OF THE NARRATIVE APPROACH

Literature in the humanities persuasively argues that persons organize knowledge as novelists, rather than as scientists, and they think, perceive, imagine, and make moral choices according to narrative structures (Sarbin, 1986). It is as story tellers, that individuals know themselves and others, interpret the past, imagine the future, make decisions, and justify their lives. The narrative assists individuals to interpret and give meaning to their life experiences (Kurtz & Tandy, 1995). As Darrel Fasching (1992) argues, individuals are not just story tellers but story dwellers.

Persons' stories are not just individually invented worlds of meaning that guide their day-to-day social relationships and negotiations, if this were so, the role of social workers, educators, and other agents of socialization would simply consist of teaching individuals to be better dreamers or better story tellers. Latino students would only need to appropriate a language of aspirations and success in higher education and create success story. Individual stories

inscribe themselves in larger narratives that provide and distribute the operative vocabularies, define "what is," and the range and distribution of possibilities. These narratives identify the forbidden and determine to whom the prohibitions apply. As Gregg (1992) argues that stories are also ideological structures produced by, and permeated by a political reality that establishes non-negotiable privileges and boundaries of freedom. Power relations, according to Gregg, are the solid, external reality which individuals confront in everyday life. The self is a byproduct of this struggle to make that empirical reality work to their own advantage.

Gregg's analysis warns against an apolitical view of the construction of the self and of individual and collective stories. We agree with Gregg in that, access and success in higher education, for instance, depends in great measure on master narratives. Those encompassing master narratives supply a ready-made grid to encompass the neophytes' story. Narratives furnish socializing mechanisms and justify power relations. However, if this was all, then the Hobbesian view of human relations suggested by Gregg, (that the preservation of one's own dignity is commonly predicated in the denying of that dignity to others) would seem to be the only available alternative.

We propose an alternative view to an apolitical approach in the construction of the self, and to the view that the self is merely a by product of power relations. Our alternative

explores narratives honoring individual and collective stories of liberation from being oppressor or oppressed (Freire, 1979). To learn to dream better, and to create better stories is essential in the creation of the self. It is also essential that in the process of doing so, a liberating cultural transformation of the larger narratives be envisioned and integrated with the effort of personal affirmation and liberation. What follows is an explanation of our attempt to put into action this perspective.

### THE NARRATIVE APPROACH TO INSTRUCTION

Post-secondary institutions are significant agents of integration of minority students into the benefits of the mainstream society. Integration interpreted here as a process by which students' narratives transform the dominant ideology. These stories, rooted in their collective memories are used as the spring-boards for learning (Vygostky, 1979). The narrative approach aims to create cognitive, emotional, and social links between Latino students and their college learning experience. Students who find their culture and learning styles reflected in both the substance and the organization of the instructional program are more likely to be motivated and to benefit from their learning experience (Kuykendall, 1992).

Linkages are created by exploring: a) the network of stories of the students, and b) the dominant narrative of higher



learning. As students' narratives are shared, and their commonalities become explicit, this network of stories is strengthened, expanded, and enriched. For instance, when students use words such as "casa" (meaning both house and home in Spanish) they may discover that the word has a different connotation than for their non-Latino classmates. Latinos often feel a devotion and loyalty to "la casa" that is easily understood among themselves (network of meaning) but which is difficult to explain to others. This understanding is rescued and valued as actual knowledge by the class. This discovery expands the expressivity of the students in both languages.

Maximizing the potential of the students' linguistic and narrative legacies furthers their cognitive development. Narrative traditions (fiction, proverbs, stories, songs, biographies) with which the students are familiar provide a cognitive link for acquiring new and unfamiliar knowledge (the cognitive link). By using accessible and familiar narratives, students can venture into the unfamiliar and become committed to their own educa-

tional process (the emotional link).

Narrative traditions locate Latino students as historical and social beings connected to communities. For example, going to college is often a collective endeavor. The choice of profession frequently responds to a felt need of the community, and a sense of obligation on the part of the student (the social link). Expressions such as: "to give back to my people," "to change things," and "to defend my community" are often used to explain career choices.

The students' narrative network is further enriched and validated by introducing short stories written by authors whose biographies resemble the students'. It is also enriched by the examination of sociological concepts traditionally applied to Latino communities. The literary works and the sociological concepts guide the students in achieving successful expressivity and in expanding their analytical abilities. These two sources, the literary and the sociological, assist students in making connections between the academic world and home. Literary and social sciences sources are used to illustrate shared experiences such as "casa." For instance, "familism" (Yep, 1995) captures some of the meaning of "casa." The instructor uses this concept to bridge the gap between academic and experiential knowledge. As students appropriate the sociological term, it becomes a tool for their own usage, rather than a potential diagnostic tool or instrument of oppression. For example,

"familism" is sometimes used by practitioners and researchers as a diagnostic label implying dependency. Used in this way, the label is emptied of its richer meaning and distorts the Latino experience of "casa." Through their narratives, students question this usage of "familism," and add complexity to the term. As a result the words "casa" and "familism" are compared and used dialectically. Students use the experience of "casa" and the concept of "familism" to question themselves and each other. They use their shared experiences of "casa" to provide meaning to the concept of "familism." At the same time, understanding "familism" helps them to be analytical of their experience of "casa."

The dominant narrative of higher learning embedded in the educational institutions and is expressed by its guardians is also explored. This can only take place if instructors assume leadership in the process. In order to be agents of change, teachers need to be engaged in their own transformation, scrutinizing their own narratives. This can be facilitated by the formation of inquiry teams of instructors where they are able to discuss their own reality frame, biases, pre-conceived ideas, and fears about change. As part of the dominant narrative, there is a generalized belief that non-English speakers are, by definition, foreigners. Instructors often share this belief. For example, in college, Puerto Ricans among other Latinos, are frequently defined and treated as foreigners, even though they are born

American citizens. This misconception generates attitudes and behaviors on the part of the instructor that attempt to melt away the students' cultural differences. The inquiry teams function as a sounding board for the instructors to examine and challenge each other's perceptions and practices, and often begin to experience the same conflict vis-a-vis the institution that the students experience. Thus, the culture of the higher learning institution is questioned.

### NARRATIVE COURSE

Dominant and other narratives are explored through a Spanish language course. The fact that this course is taught in Spanish gives students permission to use their home language as an alternative instrument of memory, thought, and expression. Additionally, it gives permission to access a universe of biographical material and the memory of their communities. This course validates the students' knowledge and recognizes the student as a source of knowledge, rather than as a blank slate. The student interprets, transforms, and challenges the canon at the same time that the canon transforms the student's story. This collective experience benefits the individual and enriches the narrative tradition of a community.

The Spanish language narrative course is articulated with other courses through team teaching. The themes originating in the narrative course are carried into other courses

complementing or challenging dominant narrative content. In English language classes students will continue the culturally grounded discussions that began in the Spanish language narrative course. For example, if the short story and discussion of the week related to "spiritualism," other courses pick up the theme, and approach it from a variety of perspectives. The instructor depends on the knowledge of the Latino student to connect their culturally narratives to the dominant narrative.

This course, in coordinating with other courses, provides an environment where students can combine indigenous concepts, based on their cultural and social practices, and on written stories — with those introduced by teachers. This approach follows the basic tenets of Paulo Freire's pedagogy (1979). This environment bridges the gap between college and home, and makes Latino students feel welcome and part of the higher education institution. The expectation is that these efforts provide students with true access to colleges and universities and will ensure their retention.

### AS A WAY OF ILLUSTRATION

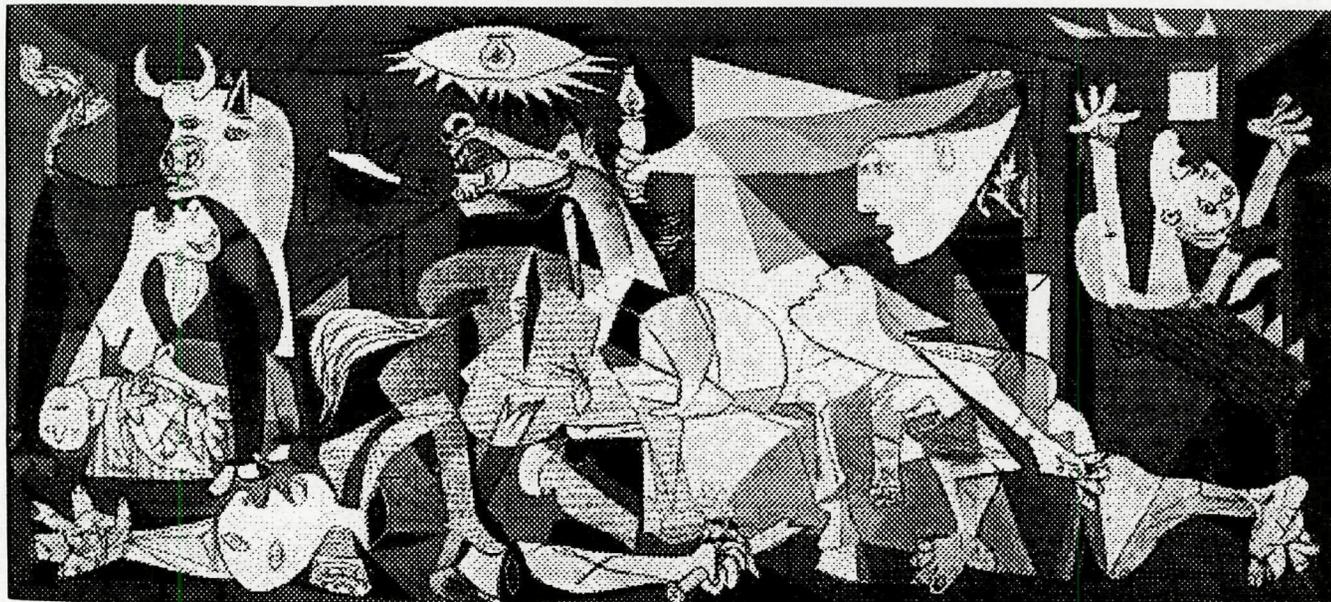
In a community college of a major Midwestern city, Latino community leaders and some instructors had expressed concern about the college's lack of effectiveness in retaining Latino students. One of the authors was approached to design a program to support Latino stu-

dent retention. His original plan was to enter the scene, design the project, and detach himself from it. As the process began, the author's story interfered with this "generic approach" to consulting. He had been a student in that same college more than a decade before, and had dropped from the program, which had not engaged him then, and was not engaging the current Latino students.

Instead of designing a project in isolation, interested faculty members were invited to participate in the assessment and design process. A faculty inquiry team was formed with a group of eight professors teaching in the department, with the largest concentration of Latino students. The instructors began to discuss their own perceptions and biases, and as the group developed, the intensity and depth of the discussions increased, and the instructors' own stories began to unfold.

The initial sessions centered around Puerto Rican/Latino cultures, students' learning styles, and the status of Latino students attending the college. Instructors shared their classroom experiences from an ethnocentric point of view. They recognized their lack of success in reaching Latino students, but they were unable to identify instruction or college culture as barriers. Originally, the students were blamed for their own lack of success. They were the ones who lacked motivation, were immature, were too involved with their families, and were not ready to benefit from post-secondary education.

## Picasso



As the inquiry teams proceeded, faculty members not only became more aware of their own biases, but started to question each other's attitudes and behaviors toward Latino students. The consultant acted as a group facilitator and provided his own acculturation experiences as material for group discussion. The instructors began to reframe some of their perceptions. For example, they used to complain about Latino students talking too much in class, identifying that behavior as "disruptive." Later, they referred to the same behavior as "collaborative learning." They began to glimpse how their own teaching style and narrative impinged on the learning style and narrative development of their Latino/a students. The team concluded that:

*"Latino students enrolled in the college have disproportionately low retention and academic success rates. Their diverse cultural and linguistic back-*

*grounds have not been systematically recognized and/or integrated in the past as resources for their academic success. A pervasive lack of recognition of their cultural distinctiveness has had a negative influence on their attitudes towards the institution. These students often perceive the college as an uncaring environment where they are not welcome."*

The inquiry team recommended that a culturally grounded pilot program be designed and implemented in response to the identified needs. The program's purpose was to specifically increase the retention rate of Latino students enrolled in the college.

The approach used collaborative learning and team-teaching; small class size; and psycho-social support services. It was academically challenging, bilingual, and culturally grounded by the stories students brought to the classroom.

An all-Latino students narrative course (4 hrs. per week) was developed. Taught in

Spanish, it employed a social work with groups approach. The narrative course instructor introduced a theme of the week (e.g. "machismo" and "fatalism"), with presentations by the students, so they could regain ownership of the cultural descriptors and provide starting points for discussion. The theme of the week was explored in every class, regardless of the language of instruction. Needless to say, this was possible due to a commitment by the faculty to team teaching. Weekly faculty meetings were used for planning and discussion of progress.

The presentations in the Spanish language narrative course were interactive in nature and introduced "words" and "meaning."

*José, one of the participants commented: Mucho le agradezco al profesor por darnos vocabulario que nunca habíamos oído en nuestras vidas. (I much thank the instructor for giving us a vocabulary that we have never heard before in*

our lives.)

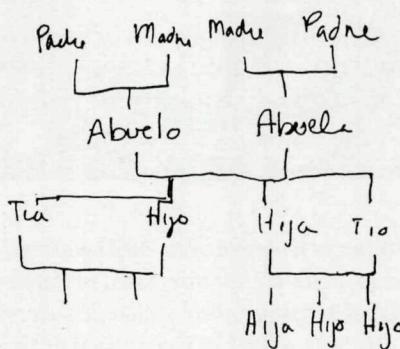
Learning and incorporating this vocabulary provided the participants with a sense of ownership and control over their lives. A dialectical process emerged and a "counter definition" of what it is to be a Latino/a student was developed. The words were no longer diagnostic, they were interpretative of the students' realities. Students quickly appropriated the terminology and used it with each other. There was a reason to believe that the classroom dialogue carried outside the class. Students, not participating in the program, approached the instructor inquiring about topics discussed in the class.

The opportunity to discuss the cultural descriptors gave students the power to transform them by ownership. They challenged them, enriched them, discarded them, or appropriated them, and the instructors could no longer use those terms as reified, dehumanized products. As part of the process, members started to identify and name concepts. They began to "discover" names for strengths and barriers present in their culture. Stephanie commented about "fatalism" as follows:

*Del cuento aprendí que uno no debe ser fatalista. No importa cual sea el problema, sea grande o pequeño cada uno de nosotros tenemos oportunidades de buscar una solución. (From the short story I learned that one cannot be a fatalist. It does not matter what type of a problem we may face, big or little, each one of us has opportunities to look for a solution.)*

In addition, topics were enriched and critiqued by short

stories. Most of the stories used were written by young Puerto Rican women writers and can be described as part of the "magic realism" literary movement. The short stories provided a culturally grounded context to discuss issues. Although there was a clear feminist approach in the students' analyses of certain topics, it was not an Anglo middle class feminist approach.



Luz commented after presenting a short story to the group:

*Esta historia nos enseña valores, por ejemplo, que las mujeres se hagan respetar por los hombres para que ellos no piensen que pueden jugar con las mujeres. Tenemos que empezar a tener respeto por una misma para que los hombres nos respeten y nos valoren, es decir darnos el lugar o el puesto que nos corresponde. (The story teaches us values, for example, that women need to make men respect them, so that they stop thinking that they can mess with women. We need to start having respect for ourselves then they will start respecting us, in other words, giving us the place or position we deserve.)*

The "voice" of the writer and her characters became a source of inspiration, often serving as models. Students learned to connect the story with the theme of the week and to connect

both to their own lives. As they identified with a character or characters of the short story, the topic began to take a human dimension. Students found commonalities between those characters and their own lives, with others; and the universality of the issues being discussed. In her final paper María wrote: *As Hispanic students, we often underestimate ourselves and feel intimidated by others. We must be realistic and accept that we will overcome the language barrier someday.*

With this comment, María created a new awareness for her and her classmates. She also created a category of experience that transcended the here and now. Other Latino students were able to relate to María's experience or organize their experience around her statement. In one of the group sessions Aracelis added:

*En la universidad, no por el color de mi piel, sino porque al no saber inglés me siento inferior a los demás y no me siento entre los míos. Pero en el grupo me siento entre los míos, porque todos sabemos la cultura, el idioma... (In the college, not due to the color of my skin but due to my lack of English, I feel less than other people and I don't feel among my people. But in the group I am among my people, we all know the language/Spanish, the culture...)*

Aracelis' comment illustrates the concept of "casa" (house & home) and what it can do for the student. To verbalize that one feels inferior is very difficult by itself but impossible vis-a-vis the culture one feels inferior about. The course provided a home-like atmosphere in which something as dangerous as feelings of inferiority could be shared. By participating in the

group students realized that they were not alone or "strange." They developed alternatives and started to model new behaviors in the safety of the classroom. Maricelli's comment illustrates this experience:

*I have learned in group that we have to try harder sometimes because we are Hispanic. We need to be together, like a family. I would like to see us as one, staying together and succeeding.*

As the process of mutual aid began, a sense of accountability towards the group emerged. Culture was celebrated and was used as a resource to improve the student's quality of life. In the last session of her group, Carmen said:

*Como mujer y mujer hispana puedo lograr muchos cambios y lograr una vida mejor, no solo para mí sino también para mi comunidad. Si yo soy feliz, todas las personas a mi alrededor podrán compartir esta felicidad. (As a woman, a Hispanic woman, I can achieve many changes and attain a better life, not only for me but also for my community. If I am happy, every one around me can share that happiness.)*

The group work modality used in the narrative course provided a space to try new behaviors in terms of participation, expression, and decision making. Students experienced the democratic process in the group and developed skills that they were able to use in other environments. Katherine spoke about this in her own terms:

*Como estudiante latina siento aún una mayor responsabilidad de expresar y defender mis ideales pues al ser minoría siento que debo hacerme escuchar, solo así podré defender, mantener y poner mi raza, mi cultura y mis ideales en alto. (As a Latina student I feel even a greater*

*responsibility to express and defend my ideals. Due to the fact that here I am considered minority, I feel I need to make myself heard. Only then, I would be able to defend, maintain, and put my race, my culture and my ideals up high.)*

Leadership skills developed or reinforced in the group were used by the students in different ways. Some students became peer facilitators, others ran for office in college organizations, and still others got involved in community organizations. In class many students for the first time in their college life felt like the adults they were. The Spanish home-language became adult, transcending family and childhood, and a source for expression of important ideas.

## RESULTS

The primary purpose of this program was to improve retention of Latino/a college students. An 89% overall quarter completion rate was attained, surpassing the goal set for a 70% quarter completion rate. College persistence, was at 80% after one quarter, and 60% after two quarters. This compares favorably with the 20% persistence rate before the implementation of the program. A faculty member speaking about the program commented:

*These students definitely worked harder in general than most other Hispanic students I have taught at the college.*

Other instructors reported that students supported each other in mastering course content both in and out of class to an unusual degree.

A questionnaire was used to assess changes in the stu-

dents' attitude towards college. Students were asked to rate a set of statements written in English and Spanish using a Likert scale (1= strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Questionnaires were administered to the two cohorts during the first week and last week of each quarter (pre-post test). No differences were found between the pre and post-tests. The data suggests that Latino students enrolled in the program were motivated and wanted to succeed, as reflected by a 3.5 pre-test cumulative average score. This initial high level of motivation did not decrease. It can be surmised that project participation assisted Latino students to maintain their positive initial attitude towards college.

It can be further hypothesized that the strong support system for Latino students developed in the program may have contributed substantially to improved retention and academic performance. The narrative course appeared to have strengthened and supported a culturally based tendency to advance as a group. Without this program, entry level students would not have had the opportunity to be together and benefit from this support system.

## Implications for the Education in the Helping Professions

Social work, nursing, education, and other helping professions have been traditional entry professions for women, first generation college educated

persons, and members of disenfranchised groups. These professions have captured the imagination of many people of minority status, not only as accessible careers — ones with less institutional barriers than the more lucrative ones, but as careers of social commitment to, and solidarity with, oppressed groups. Ironically, little has been done in these fields to develop culturally grounded educational practices (Carter, 1995). For instance, social work curriculum development often proceeds from a master narrative. That master narrative displaces the cultural background and knowledge of social work minority students. We think that the proposed approach, with due adaptations, can be applied in the education of helping professionals.

It is not only Latino students who may benefit from this approach to education. Other groups who are underrepresented or invisible in colleges and universities could benefit from a similar program. We think that the approach can be specially useful not only as means of responding to the educational needs of minority students, but also as a means of modeling culturally grounded professional practice for all students.

The approach is cost-effective and requires only a slight curriculum reorganization. Listed are specific conditions for an effective replication of the approach.

- A coordinated college-wide awareness effort is needed.

- The involvement of the targeted community is vital for the success of these type of efforts.
- Once this process begins, constituencies that were traditionally voiceless start to play an advocacy role. College administrators need to welcome these dynamics and sincerely engage in dialogue.
- As the approach is replicated, the whole process needs to be documented and evaluated.
- Comparison studies will be useful in increasing the understanding of what works and under what conditions.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, the home-college link allows students to be learners and producers of expertise, and therefore gives them the power to transform their environment. Instructors become allies in this transformative process. This transformation can only materialize if there is an institutional commitment to support it. This commitment needs to take place at all levels, especially at gate-keeping points, such as admissions, financial aide, student support services, faculty recruitment, and academic resources.

The cost of exclusion is much higher than the uncertainty of innovation in this area. Latino students and other unrepresented groups deserve a dignified place in higher education. They have an important contribution to make and the whole college community has

much to gain from the experience of inclusion. □

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