

**Crossing the Border through Service-Learning:
A Study of Cross-Cultural Relationships**

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A STUDY OF CROSS-CULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS

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(ABSTRACT)

The overarching objective of this study is to examine the nexus of relationships that emerged between university students and Latino families paired through a university service-learning course. The relationships crossed socially constructed boundaries of ethnic groups, language, educational levels, and socioeconomic status, exploring the intersection of community service, scholarship, and teaching-and-learning.

The research questions necessitated the use of qualitative research methods. The narrative attempts to capture the essence of the setting, the actors, and the resultant relationships by describing and examining the spontaneous relationships that occurred.

The researcher spent 1½ years as an interpreter/participatory member in the Latino community prior to beginning the research study. She collected data collected for this case study over 2½ years, examining the backgrounds of the participants, their perspectives toward their partners, and the role of service-learning in the development of relationships between two disparate groups. She conducted 46 interviews with students and community members while collecting over 2500 reflection papers, 100 transformation papers, and 25 PowerPoint presentations from students.

The participants developed relationships at different levels, some resulting in friendships that will probably continue for some time; others sharing respect and concern for each other only during the placement. A few unsuccessful partnerships had to be changed. Student and community voices presented an appreciation for the partner's language and culture. The data illustrated satisfying reciprocal relationships in which students and families emerged united in solidarity against a society they deemed unjust.

This study seeks to provide information for educators considering service-learning

programs, examining a course that provides opportunities for interaction between university students and community members. Through the participants' voices, the reader can explore the integration of academic learning with learning lived in the community.

Finally, this study submits general proposals for the inclusion of service-learning programs in Foreign Language and Teacher Education programs as a means of nurturing paradigm shifts in student attitudes toward members of other cultures as well as paradigm shifts in the Latinos' attitudes toward their new culture, suggesting possible deeper societal transformation as the academy and the community become agents of change through service-learning in the Latino community.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to all the Latinos who crossed the border into my heart.

Wind tugging at my sleeve
feet sinking into the sand
I stand at the edge where earth touches ocean
where the two overlap
a gentle coming together
at other times and places a violent clash

Across the border in Mexico
stark silhouette of houses gutted by waves,
cliffs crumbling into the sea,
silver waves marbled with spume
gashing a hole under the border fence.

Miro el mar atacar
la cerca en Border Field Park
con sus buchones de agua,
an Easter Sunday resurrection
of the brown blood in my veins.

Oigo el llorido del mar; el respiro del aire,
my heart surges to the beat of the sea.
In the gray haze of the sun
the gulls' shrill cry of hunger,
the tangy smell of the sea seeping into me.

I walk through the hole in the fence
to the other side.
Under my fingers I feel the gritty wire
rusted by 139 years
of the salty breath of the sea.

Beneath the iron sky
Mexican children kick their soccer ball across,
run after it, entering the United States

I press my hand to the steel curtain—
chainlink fence crowned with rolled barbed wire—
rippling from the sea where Tijuana touches San Diego
unrolling over mountains
and plains
and deserts,
this “Tortilla Curtain” turning into *el río Grande*
flowing down to the flatlands
of the Magic Valley of South Texas
its mouth emptying into the Gulf.

1,950 mile-long open wound
dividing a *pueblo*, a culture,
running down the length of my body,
staking fence rods in my flesh,
splits me splits me
me raja me raja

This is my home
This thin edge of
barbwire.

But the skin of the earth is seamless.
The sea cannot be fenced,
el mar does not stop at borders.
To show the white man what she thought of his
arrogance,
Yemayá blew that wire fence down.

This land was Mexican once,
was Indian always
and is.
And will be again.

*Yo soy un puente tendido
del mundo gabacho al del mojado,
lo pasado me estira pa''trás
y lo presente pa''delante,
Que la Virgen de Guadalupe me cuide
Ay ay ay, soy mexicana de este lado*
(Anzaldúa, 1987, pp.23-25).

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