Wading into Border Pedagogy: Teacher Preparation through Service Learning

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Abstract

In our increasingly interconnected global society, learning to think differently about ourselves in a border context, making crossings and connections, reflecting on our own position and power, and articulating a vision of social justice, have become necessary civic skills. In the southwest border region, an anti-immigrant, pro-assimilation social and educational environment clouds the practices and understanding of border pedagogy. This article examines teacher education coursework in a small liberal arts university in the border region. Teacher education border pedagogy combined with community service learning offers an effective way of developing border crossers who have moved beyond stereotyping and the tourist’s gaze to have a sensibility for social justice through K-12 teaching. The study offers practical frameworks with which to understand the students’ developmental process and practical applications for policy makers and teacher educators.

In our increasingly interconnected global society, learning to think differently about ourselves, making theoretical crossings and connections, reflecting on our own position and power, and articulating a vision of social justice become necessary civic skills. Teachers who move beyond stereotyping and the tourist’s gaze when working with students and families who have literally crossed a geopolitical border to be in that classroom do so intentionally. These teachers know that, in truth, all students cross many kinds of identity borders (linguistic, socio-economic, cultural, political, religious, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) in their K-12 experiences. In practice, teachers who espouse a sensibility for social justice or stimulate the deepest forms of civic engagement, model border crossing as an important aspect of their teaching identity (Romo and Roseman, 2004). In this context, the question arises, “What do we do, as teacher educators, when the overwhelming majority of teachers continue to be White or European American and tend to teach in the way that they learn (Romo, Bradfield, & Serrano, 2004). This is distinctly true in border communities, where we have classrooms that are increasingly complex regarding language, immigration, class, culture, and formal educational experiences as it is generally true throughout the United States.

One response to diverse classrooms has been multicultural education or culturally relevant pedagogy, whose basic principles are: the theory of cultural pluralism; ideals of social justice and the end of racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice and discrimination; affirmations of culture in the teaching and learning process; and visions of educational equity and excellence leading to high levels of academic learning for all children and youth (Banks, 1994; Bennett, 2002; Davidman and Davidman, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994). However, border areas offer complexities that are related to yet distinctive from culturally responsive teaching. This particular approach, border pedagogy, has previously not been defined in educational policy or teacher preparation programs. Similarly, a working definition of border pedagogy does not exist in the polarized socio-political and educational context of the border region. On one hand, most discussions of border pedagogy have been confined to theoretical paradigms. On the other hand, the following quote reflects a strong sentiment against the Mexican-U.S. border and those who cross those geopolitical borders.

“The persistent inflow of Hispanic immigrants threatens to divide the United States into two peoples, two cultures, and two languages. Unlike past immigrant groups, Mexicans and other Latinos have not assimilated into mainstream U.S. culture, forming instead their own political and linguistic enclaves—from Los Angeles to Miami—and rejecting the Anglo-Protestant values that built the American dream. The United States ignores this challenge at its peril.” (Huntington, 2004, p.1)

Theoretically, border pedagogy is related to multicultural education, as well as to critical pedagogy, popularized by the Brazilian philosopher and educator Paolo Freire (1921-1997). Freire’s critical pedagogy emphasizes dialogue, praxis (action informed by social justice values), naming the world (e.g., dynamics of oppression), and a connection with participants’ lived experiences. He argued that few
human encounters are exempt from oppression because, by virtue of race, class, gender, and ethnicity, people tend to be victims and/or perpetrators of oppression. Freire consequently promoted “problem posing,” which integrates theory and practice as a means to clarify the causes and consequences of human suffering, as a pedagogy for social change (1985).

In addition to the need to promote individual multicultural competency, the authors encourage problem posing in the examination of teacher education practices that prepare teachers to advocate for all. In short, we call for the promotion of teacher education border pedagogy, which is linked to both theory and practice. Teacher education border pedagogy (TEBP) relates to critical democracy, wherein the values of a democratic revolution (freedom, equality, liberty, and justice) must provide the principles by which differences are affirmed within diverse public spheres (Mann, 1990). TEBP also promotes the skills of critical thinking (interrogating power, meaning, and identity). It encourages tolerance, ethical sophistication and openness. In short, teacher education border pedagogy works to de-colonize and revitalize learning and teaching to promote liberty and justice for all.

Relative to classroom practices, border pedagogy is a practice that enables teachers and students to view education as a political, social, and cultural enterprise (Giroux, 1988). Most particular to K-12 practices, border pedagogy engages students in the multiple references that constitute different cultural codes, experiences, and languages that help students to construct their own narratives and histories and revise democracy through socio-cultural negotiation. While it may be intuitively obvious that if teachers do not internalize and critically understand border pedagogy, they will not be able promote the socio-cultural negotiation that promotes liberty and justice for all in K-12 classrooms Howard, 1999; Wiske, 1998).

This essay examines a border teacher educational program’s nascent efforts to develop multicultural competencies in future teachers (i.e., border pedagogy). The data was gathered from a final integrative essay that forty-eight (undergraduate and graduate, predominantly white female) pre-service teachers’ wrote as part of their first educational foundations course. The data highlighted the significance of university classroom border pedagogy practices: readings that helped them to explicitly examine their own class and racial privilege; simulations that raised issues of responding to change (e.g., culture shock); and videos that introduced issues related to the politics of education that were previously unconsidered by the students. However, the classroom learning was powerfully amplified in CSL placements, where students interacted with students and families from groups and life experiences that were often very different from those of the pre-service teachers.

During the semester, students were required to serve ten hours at one of the following placements from a university supported Community Service Learning (CSL) program. The instructor selected the CSL options to expose pre-service teachers to alternative educational resources and programs in the area. The four placements were: a family shelter, a school for homeless youth, a Sudanese community resource center, and a bilingual (Spanish-English) charter school. Students incorporated reflections about their multicultural competency development over the course of the semester. Some of the prompts to guide the students are listed below. However, none of the prompts addresses social justice or border pedagogy directly.

- Discuss your increased knowledge and understanding of the background experiences, languages, skills and abilities of students from diverse backgrounds;
- Discuss how you have come to recognize and minimize bias in the classroom, and to create an equitable classroom community that contributes to the physical, social, emotional and intellectual safety of all students.
- Give an example of how you have systematically examined your stated and implied beliefs, attitudes and expectations related to gender and other diverse students, families, schools and communities, and to apply pedagogical practice that foster high expectations for academic performance from all participants in all contexts.

This study examines the question, How are future (monocultural) teacher candidates effectively prepared to teach in a border context/community?

Figure 1
Two images leap out from the data. The first image begins with a kind of transformation from multicultural education philosophy and theory that is juxtaposed with K-12 Southern California school
practices. The data describes the shift from separate bodies of knowledge to the integration of both, which appears to come through the development of relationships.

The process of integration brings up the second image: wading into the ocean. While several themes (Poverty, Immigration, Race/Culture, and Language) clearly related to the study questions surfaced, this paper will only focus on data related to poverty, as it offered a description of transformational stages that were common to all of the students to some degree: fear, awareness, giving, reciprocity, and enlightenment. Student learning or transformational processes paralleled the following guided imagery for the reader to consider.

Imagine being at the beach on a hot day. Perhaps it is a familiar sight. Perhaps it is the first time you’ve actually studied this particular ocean first hand. In any case, you’re going in. At first, you may feel some anxiety, perhaps fear, as you consider jumping in. Move forward and feel the shock of the cold water. Splash your feet until you become aware the cold water is actually refreshing. Splash your arms and legs with the water as you move further into the ocean, navigating increasingly larger waves. Little by little, immerse yourself. Enjoy how you feel in the water. Your body is slowly acclimating to the cold, and before you know it, you dive into the water. Your whole body from head to toe is completely wet. You are acclimated to the temperature of the water and feel completely refreshed. You are having such a wonderful time that you even want to encourage others to join you. This is how the students in our study felt. They experienced a transformation from being fearful to becoming advocates by their experience in service learning. By the time they completed their required CSL hours, they extended their participation and took up stances as advocates for change.

The first stage that the students faced was fear. Recall standing on the warm sand, awed by the crashing waves and then the initial shock of the cold water. Many students involved in service learning described feeling fear and shock at the beginning of their experience. Students were comfortable with being in past familiar situations. However, once placed into the unknown or unfamiliar they were often afraid. The following quotation illustrates this.

As I entered the third grade classroom for the first time, I still can remember the real sense of fear that I had toward these students. It took me by surprise that I was actually frightened at the small children, yet with the idea that I was of a different social and cultural makeup, I felt the pain of being the minority.

This sense of fear transformed into the second stage of awareness. After students completed an assignment in which they attended an orientation and had researched the placement, they became more aware of and able to differentiate between the poverty in the community and the students they met. This is similar to getting acclimated to the cold ocean water. After several visits, students began to open their eyes to new situations and ideas that they have not been exposed to before. One student explained, “I have grown to understand that many children don’t have the same luxuries as I had when I was growing up.” The pre-service teachers began to see their own privileges and how poverty impacted learning.

The center also caters to all ages, there are street kids that come into the center for help, and these are the kids that live on the streets with no families. It’s very sad and made me aware of another reason teachers need to know their students backgrounds. I realized that in my future classrooms I will have student of very poor socioeconomic classes and possibly students that do not even have a roof over their heads. Teachers need to cater to these students needs and if they cannot do that then they need to find a place where these children’s needs can be met.

This awareness led to the third stage, giving. This stage reflected that the future teachers were getting over the shock of the (poverty) ocean. They made conscious efforts to engage with their newfound friends through giving. However, their giving took two forms. The first kind appeared to be in response to guilt, whereby they wanted to “help the less fortunate.” This is a danger point that Camacho points out as ‘challenge is to think about how to have students critically reflect on their own social locations and be cognizant of how their “gazes” are imbued with power (in press, p.2). These students became givers of materials, food, and toys.

The second kind of giving, by contrast, came from students who had themselves experienced poverty. They focused on building up K-12 students’ academic skills and spending time with them. As one student said, “I want and need to do something to better these circumstances.” In either case, the children they met became important to them and nurturing relationships began to evolve.

While we were working on homework he would ask me a question about my life and I would ask
him a question about his. He had some really hard things to say. His life does not sound easy, I can’t even imagine going through half of the things he has gone through, and he is only 13 years old. We finished the homework and then I left. And the second I got into the car I began to cry. I am not sure why exactly, I think I was just overcome by my emotions. I spent the next few days thinking about all the things that Yonis had said. It was very evident that all the kids did not have a lot of money. I felt really bad and there was that huge layer of guilt hanging over me. So I decided from that point on I would always bring something with me, even if it were just something small. I have brought mostly food, but also clothes and when I went up to Los Angeles for the weekend I bought the center a basketball from UCLA. I love to see the kids look so excited and they seem to really appreciate everything I do for them. Over the past eight or nine weeks I have become really attached to these kids two in particular, Yonis and Shukri.

The fourth stage that students exhibited is reciprocity. As one student noted, “CSL is reciprocal.” The college students that came into these different schools and centers served as tutors or teachers aids. They taught and helped the children in particular subject matter to assist the teacher. However, these college students also received knowledge from the children and the teachers they came in contact with. In this stage students realize that they are gaining valuable life lessons from this experience. Several students echoed the insight that “they taught me to welcome others different than myself because they have something valuable to teach me.” These college students have gained far more than the university classroom alone could offer; this integrative knowledge and internal change process cannot be learned merely through textbooks, journal articles, or lectures.

The homeless children I was able to work with taught me something over this past semester. I have learned that life shouldn’t be measured by a dollar and dime. There’s more to living than the constant worrying about what kind of car I’m driving and what type of designer pants I’m planning on wearing tomorrow. Life should be about living, breathing, loving to be alive!

The final stage is enlightenment or advocacy. This enlightenment feeling is similar to the feeling of diving into the ocean. After beginning to enjoy the refreshing, cool water, it is difficult to get out. When a big wave comes, you now know how to dunk your head into the water in order not to get rolled around in the sand. This feeling of conscious competency in CSL usually developed towards the end of the semester. Students noticed that they were enjoying themselves and the relationships they had made. Students also realized that they wanted to become active advocates for their mentees, often continuing their contacts at the site even after their assigned time was over. Others became advocates for service learning, “when I become a high school English teacher, I want to challenge my students to do community service.” CSL was clearly a valuable catalyst for students’ deep learning.

The joy I have received from my participation allowed me to grow as a person. I feel that it has really put a face behind those endless pages of text readings, lectures, and videos and has made me think on a more conscious level. I now am aware that reality and truth is the only way to behave in and outside of the classroom. I attribute my spiritual and professional enlightening to the realism of my students.

It is clear that border pedagogy in the university classroom enabled pre-service teachers to view education as a political, social, and cultural enterprise (Giroux, 1988). Most particular to K-12 practices, border pedagogy engaged pre-service teachers in the multiple references that constitute different cultural codes, experiences, and languages that help them to construct their own narratives and histories and revise democracy through socio-cultural negotiation. In other words, as a result of integrating theory and practice, students experienced an enlightenment/ awareness of complex and interrelated border issues (e.g., language, immigration, poverty, culture) in their immediate surroundings, a close and nearby world, which was opened through their service learning experience.

The data suggests that the students moved from ignorance about the community or the unknown to having their ‘eyes opened’ through establishing relationships (Delpit, 1995). Furthermore, their experiences impacted the ways that students analyzed curriculum/ instructional strategies. Students’ experiences were more than just learning about poverty and social justice; they developed new perceptions about themselves and their roles as teachers (Edelman, 1992). This learning served as a valuable bridge between the communities of the oppressed and the privileged university.

**Implications**

The research offers useful applications for policy makers in the designing teacher preparation programs, for college professors teaching educational credentialing or master’s courses, and for future teachers. The stages of transformation, reflected in the metaphor of wading into the ocean, serve as useful indicators of individual and institutional development towards border pedagogy knowledge, dispositions, and skills. At very least, the data suggests that CSL can be effectively used to transform fears, stereotypes,
and social borders rather than reinforce them (Camacho, 2004).

Administrators who design teacher education programs may look at CSL as an effective example of experiential learning that empowers teacher education programs. The data indicates that beyond a personal experience of enlightenment expressed by students who participated in this course, CSL was academically beneficial for the pre-service teachers who integrated classroom learning with experiences and made their learning their own (Wiske, 2000) Bridging universities and communities in this way has become an exceptional way to enhance the learning experience for the students and help the community.

This course and methodology showed itself to be an element of transformation change. It is clear that university professors of education can balance and enrich their curriculum with powerful activities that promote peace and social justice along with community based service. Both university border pedagogy practices and application are vital for profound learning experiences and transformation of the students. Students often linked one body of knowledge to another and generated their own insights and future applications of their learning.

College students who read this study can have an idea of what to expect before engaging into a community service-learning project. Although the transformation experience occurred on different levels for each student and the relationships developed were all unique, the authors hope that future teachers will not see how they can help others but also how others can help teachers learn. The challenges of applying border pedagogy are clear. Many educators, elected officials and members of the general public fear those on other sides of economic, social, and geo-political borders. It is incumbent upon teacher educators and K-12 teachers to dive into the field and model the value of border pedagogy.

References
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End Note
The study follows a program revision at a small, private liberal arts university in southern California, in which faculty infused themes of social justice, diversity, and community in the credential coursework the year before. In this context, a question of program efficacy arises, “Are we adequately preparing future teachers to work effectively in diverse settings, particularly in the socio-political border region?”