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Right on the Border: Mexican-American Students Write Themselves Into The(ir) World

Philip Zwerling

I always teach lessons on active verbs and wordy sentences, but I'd never taught apostrophes before at the upper-division, undergraduate level. However, I'd read papers by upper-division, undergraduate students, and these college juniors and seniors struggle not only to distinguish *it's* from *its*, but they also see no reason to add an apostrophe to the phrase *the book was Janes* or to change the phrase *we keep an eye on other government agencies*.

With a ninety-five percent Mexican-American student body in Hidalgo County, Texas, where one third of the population subsists below the poverty line, the University of Texas Pan American (UTPA) serves students who are frequently the first in their families to attend college and who are themselves academically underprepared.

I teach creative writing at UTPA. After twenty years in the Unitarian Universalist parish ministry, I began my second career as a Visiting Professor of English at Ursinus College outside Philadelphia. With a student body of less than 1,500, Ursinus is an elite institution whose tuition and ambition rival Harvard. Students arrive at Ursinus from the top of their high school classes. The new Cadillac Escalades and Hummer H2s in the campus parking lots bear student rather than faculty parking permits, gifts from affluent and educated parents. Students' SAT scores and good grammar match a well-developed sense of entitlement. They knew where to place their apostrophes, if not a sense of justice.

When I arrived in the far southern tip of Texas a year and a half ago, I quickly realized that UTPA was different. Students know that with the lowest tuition of the UTs, lowest capital reinvestment, and lowest faculty salaries, their education here is a ticket not to "getting out" of a culture of poverty but to "getting by" and remaining in the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

Students questioned me as a new Anglo professor: "Do you really like it here?" and "How do we compare to the students where you taught before?" Often juggling full-time jobs, their own children, and sometimes dysfunctional extended families, students expected to hear the worst comparisons. Faculty colleagues told me that what they liked best about the students was their respectfulness. I wondered how much of that diffidence was culturally based and how much was low self-esteem developed through years in a racist and substandard school system. This is the story of a service-learning project that challenged that dynamic.

Twenty-eight years ago on a hot and dusty summer day in Managua, Nicaragua, I stood in the *Plaza de la Revolución* at dusk. Around me, tens of

thousands of high school kids jumped out of army trucks, civilian pick-up trucks, dump trucks, and any other vehicle that would carry them, returning from six months of labor in the *campo* teaching illiterate *campesinos* to read and write. The teens formed brigades, shouting slogans like *patria libre o morir* (a free country or death) and *puno en alto libro abierto* (a raised fist and an open book) and rushed to greet their parents, who had spent the last months fearing for the safety of their sons and daughters in the face of increasing *contra* violence funded by the government.

As part of a small delegation put together by Dr. Benjamin Spock and author/educator Jonathan Kozol, I later interviewed a handful of high school students who, with sixty thousand of their peers, had left their middle-class,

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urban homes to live with peasants in their shacks in the countryside, working in the fields during the day and teaching reading and writing by lantern at night. The students recovered Nicaraguan history, telling stories like that

of anti-imperialist guerrilla leader Augusto Sandino, who the first Anastasio Somoza murdered in 1933 and wrote into the nation's history books as little more than a bandit. They also shared contemporary social problems to teach and *concienticize* (the phrase of Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) adults three and four times their age, all this in a country where the annual per capita income hovered below six-hundred dollars, life expectancy was a mere fifty-two years, and the illiteracy rate exceeded fifty percent. As Carlos Tunnermann, the Nicaraguan Minister of Education, told me,

Not only did the peasants learn to read and write but the *brigidistas* [the teens doing the teaching] learned for the first time about life in the countryside. They learned about peasant life. They learned peasant songs, art, history, customs. They were also educated. (Zwerling 67)

At the end of six months, 420,000 people had learned the rudiments of reading and writing. In one rural village, I watched a 75-year-old man laboriously write his name, which he had just learned to do for the first time in his life. Yet, the greatest lessons were learned by the teenage teachers. I can never forget meeting little Felix Vijil, who stood under five feet tall. Felix was only eleven years old, too young to legally join the twelve to eighteen-year-old *brigidistas*, but he told me that he had run away from his comfortable urban home to "infiltrate" a literacy brigade. Joining late, he got "the ones that were hard to teach," he confided to me, twelve students between the ages of seventeen

and sixty two. He planted corn during the day and taught classes in the evening. He suffered from fleas and worms and, in the middle of the course, came down with rickettsia, a type of typhoid, which sent him home for bed rest for two weeks. At the end of the campaign, one of his twelve students earned her certificate as literate, and the other eleven committed to the follow-up program of adult education. When I asked Felix what he would do if such a campaign were ever necessary another time, he replied, "I'll infiltrate again" (Zwerling 70).

At that moment, it first dawned on me how teenage energy, fearlessness, law-breaking, and risk-taking could be expressed in positive action and how teens could learn selflessness and equality when they were invited to enter the world as actors rather than as spectators (to use Boal's categories in *Theatre of the Oppressed*). Writing and reading are not just marketable skill sets. They separate us from the beasts of the field by allowing us to participate in and shape social and political life.

There are no apostrophes in the Spanish of student/teacher Felix Vijil, but there's still plenty of grammar. And I care that my students today learn all the rules of written communication if only so that their job applications present them as competent prospects.

But the issue of competency leads to the real issue of sense of self and ultimately to issues of power. Most of my students today are on the low end of the economic spectrum. Their working-class roots are matched by lives lived outside the racial and cultural "norms" of the United States beyond the Rio Grande Valley. So, how do these students become people with power? By becoming, like Felix, both students and teachers. Not through personal aggrandizement and acquisitiveness in a consumer society but through civic engagement and seeing themselves as powerful enough, knowing enough, "being" enough, to change their society. I'd been at least as impressed by the changes in those Nicaraguan *brigidistas* as in their newly literate adult students, and I wanted the same changes for my south Texas students.

One more thought before I describe our project: often when I enter the university for an evening class, I pass colleagues leaving after a day of teaching. I remember one colleague addressing all of us first-year faculty and describing her job as "the transmission of knowledge." By and large, the college is structured around what Freire called the "banking theory of education," in which the teachers who know stuff (algebra, grammar) deposit bits of that knowledge into the empty minds of their students until they, too, are filled with knowledge. This is the very basis of lecture courses: I, the teacher, tell you things you do not know; you remember them; and spit them back to me on a test. Then you get a grade and eventually a degree and are deemed competent to inflict this process on some other victim (Luigi Pirandello captured this absurdity in his play *The Lesson*, which features a murderous teacher and an unending line of student victims). This may be why I hated school as a student and only learned to appreciate education when I returned to school for advanced degrees at an advanced age. As an adult, the stick and carrot of tests and grades meant little to me. I felt a new freedom to investigate the things that pricked my interest and put

little energy into the rest. As an undergraduate, I had been a philosophy major, but as a graduate student, I earned degrees first in creative writing and later in theatre. I chose my field, and my teachers became aides in the process of my self-education. I ran my own individual knowledge factory, and as long as I did enough to satisfy degree requirements, I owned the means of production.

The Nicaragua experience informed my life choices in ways I only understood slowly and in retrospect. My studies moved from the literacy crusades of Paulo Freire (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) to the theology of Gustavo Gutierrez (*Liberation Theology*) to the theatre of Augusto Boal (*Theatre of the Oppressed*). Each situated individual success in community. It was the Panamanian sociologist Raul Albert Leis whose definition of community theatre found resonance in my own teaching. He divided theatre in three categories: theatre that was for the community; theatre that was for and of the community; and theatre that was for, of, and by the community. My own research (*After School Theatre Programs and At Risk Teens*) demonstrated that theatre in the last category most effectively led to prosocial actions by teenagers at risk for drug use, truancy, and incarceration. My goal was education that was for, by, and of the community and as a process rather than an oppressive system imposed by outside “experts” whose goal is a uniform product we call an educated person with the cachet of a degree.

I began with a slim volume entitled *Community Writing: Researching Social Issues Through Composition* by Paul Collins. In less than two-hundred pages, Collins maps out a semester course of civic engagement including the overlooked steps of beginning with the students, their communities, and their needs. My plan was to offer the first ever, to my limited knowledge, course in Community Writing at UTPA. My inchoate goal: connect students from our isolated geography at the tip of the USA to a wider world and make them feel that they are actors rather than spectators to an historical pageant called politics.

Where to begin a Special Topics course in English? By asking them their goals. They told me that they wanted to “practice public speaking,” “get published,” “get an A” “discover an audience and purpose and piss people off,” “become [better writers],” “influence people with writing,” “inform the community on issues and impact the community,” “voice opinions,” “discuss issues,” “learn venues for publication,” “learn to accept criticism,” “learn community issues,” “put opinion in open,” “inspire other writers,” “write without pissing people off,” “learn the ethics of community writing,” “write convincingly,” and “reach people off campus.” Fifteen weeks later, we had accomplished every goal on their list.

We started with *Community Writing* as our only text. Though the class read only the first 120 pages of what is a slim, though unique, book, it launched us into research and writing. What I like about Collins is his emphasis on the agency of the students: they reflect on and identify the multiple communities to which they belong (racial, neighborhood, school, etc.), and they decide which issues or problems impact their communities. Then they explore the problems through library research and interviews, next choosing their own solutions. They

become the experts, form opinions, and their writing becomes not an academic exercise but a tool for change. Students first wrote two letters to the editor and then two longer, op-ed pieces on local, national, and international issues.

First, they had to present their pieces to the class and get feedback for their ideas. I remember one student who was writing a rebuttal to those who thought video games (World of Warcraft was his game) negatively impacted their players or might even be addictive. Under class questioning, he declared himself not addicted but did admit to gaming on average of four hours daily.

Students had not only to write these pieces but also put their names on them and send them out to newspapers, which they also researched and chose for publication. We spent successive days sharing the published pieces with the entire class. Halfway through the semester, we shifted gears and turned our attention to Bentsen State Park, about ten miles away in Mission, Texas.

My political and pedagogical inclinations, the recommendation of most people in the field, and common sense all argued for

allowing students to choose their own service learning project. However, finding community partners, an indispensable key to working off campus, was much more work for me than teaching the class. It was not just that I was new to the area but that there was no clearinghouse for non-profits (the University had shuttered its own Office of Community Service a few years earlier). A full year before I planned to offer the course, I began scouring local newspapers and tracking down volunteer groups that sounded promising. I found groups that worked with seniors and others that served at-risk teens (both groups I had worked with previously). I'll never know, however, if they were effective organizations, but I did discover that they lacked anyone who would return my phone calls or e-mails or keep an appointment with me on a consistent basis. Months passed and I still had no one to work with. Then I met her.

There should be a song for that moment when you first know, not love, but the certainty that your search is over and that a project that has lived only in your mind will one day become real. It would have to be an academic song, of course, footnoted and theorized, but a song nonetheless. In her green uniform and state patches, I mistook her at first for *la migra*, but Jennifer Hall takes people in rather than keeping them out, serving as the Volunteer Coordinator for a series of area state parks. She not only responded enthusiastically to my idea but also invited me out for a tour of one of her parks. Then we planned and plotted for the next six months.

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Students didn't have a choice of where to work in the community, but they still had a choice of what they would do, as you will see. We transitioned from letters to the editor and op-ed pieces into researching Bentsen State Park. Each student was required to write a two-page report on the park prior to Hall's first visit. This enabled them to feel informed and to ask educated questions when she appeared.

On her first classroom visit, she arrived armed with a list of fifty projects she'd like to see for the park: all kinds of brochures, promotional items, and community outreach that required research and writing. Students could choose to write about dragonflies, butterflies, or birds; produce a PowerPoint for school visits; or revamp the park's web site. More importantly, she let the students think outside the list. They came up with ideas for a series of bird color postcards for sale in the gift shop, a MySpace page for the park, and a children's picture book with a story set along the park trails.

Two days later, the class met at the park. For many of the students, it was their first visit; others hadn't been there in years. Hall gave us a private tour. We watched hawks circling the boardwalk and discovered a four-inch Walking Stick daintily prowling the railing.

The students had a week to choose their projects. Their final grade would depend upon producing a physical product of use to the park and a written report on their work. Knowing that seven weeks was too long to let them wander about on their own, I instituted a series of benchmarks to keep them on course and on time. In the second week, I required that they submit a detailed description of their project and a timeline for completion. In week three, each student made a verbal progress report to the class. I assigned a different set of three inquisitors for each presenter to ask them tough questions and press them on any overly optimistic projections. Week five called for a written progress report. I had students post their reports online to Blackboard and assigned a daisy chain of critiquers so that each student received feedback from three other students. In week seven, each student appeared before us to unveil their products. Throughout, I kept up the grammar work (i.e. active verb constructions, vivid language, and weeding out unnecessary words), standards we then applied to grading their reports.

I also invited a reporter for the local daily paper to write a story about the class, and her appearance during class time to interview students about their projects added another layer of seriousness to the work. The paper sent a photographer two days later, and the story appeared as the class ended.

The class completed most projects on time and met or exceeded their goals. They earned As (6) and Bs (7). Only four of nineteen students completed their projects but produced only average work (Cs), and two fell by the wayside under the press of academic work or family difficulties and took Incompletes as their grade. The As were earned for the most creative projects, most of which had not been on Hall's list: the children's book, MySpace page, and original photo postcards.

The children's book, *Little Louie's Big Adventure*, slowly grew into the most creative project I have seen developed in any of my classes. When the three students working together first approached me and declared they would write, illustrate, print, and bind a children's book, I told them they were biting off more than they could chew in six weeks. As usual, I was wrong.

The text went through four drafts, finally following a Belted Kingfisher from New Jersey on his annual migration south, seeking his cousin Pablo in Bentsen State Park. On his quest, Louie visits all the highlights of the park and encounters a javelina, bass, chachalaca, toad, and armadillo, all native to the park. That left the third student only two weeks to paint ten full-page illustrations to accompany the story. The students then printed and bound the book, turning in their project one week prior to the deadline and presenting a copy to the park for their children's story hour.

I was so impressed with the quality of the book that I have so far approached two publishers of children's books, and although one turned it down, they did offer to hire the student illustrator to work on other books on the strength of her work for this volume.

Jennifer Hall returned for the last two classes to hear the final reports, receive the projects that the students presented to the Park, and give each of us an official Certificate of Appreciation. Based on each student's estimate of their work time, she calculated that the class had devoted a total of 900 volunteer hours to the Park outside of class time.

The class ended two months ago, but I am still digesting the following lessons in anticipation of my next attempt:

1. A community partner is crucial. Practically speaking, it is less important what good work they do than whether or not they are competent. Will they answer e-mails and make it to meetings? Can you count on them not to let the students down? Pluses would be enthusiasm, positive personalities, and appreciation. You will put too much work into this to be left in the lurch by someone who isn't there when needed.
2. Students need to feel ownership for their projects and a sense that the work they do matters beyond a grade. Hall and the news reporter supplied that. If the students don't get to choose who they work with, at least let them choose the project they work on.
3. It helps to have on-campus support. Once upon a time, UTPA had a staffed Office of Community Outreach. Although it was gone, we did have a Service Learning Committee of faculty for moral and material support.
4. Don't babysit projects, but do hold students accountable. The requirements to a timeline, oral and written progress reports, and peer review kept students on track and on time.
5. Don't say no to new ideas (book, MySpace). It's simple: no one of us knows everything. Trust your students.
6. Incorporate applied writing at every step and work on improving student writing. They will learn apostrophes.

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