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Mainstreaming vs. Individuating: Incorporating Inclusive Pedagogy into Spanish Language and Culture Courses

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Mainstreaming vs. Individuating: Incorporating Inclusive Pedagogy into Spanish Language and Culture Courses

Abstract

At a time when higher education is experiencing unprecedented nationwide growth in populations of students of color, it is crucial to talk about inclusive practices in general, as well as in one's own specific discipline. As a member of the department of Hispanic Studies at CSB/SJU, in the Fall of 2016, I had the opportunity to participate in the Humanities cohort of the inclusive pedagogy events sponsored by a Mellon grant. Coincidentally, our department had just decided to introduce a new course for advanced Spanish speakers geared to heritage speakers, which I volunteered to teach as a pilot in Fall 2016 to determine the needs of this student group.

In an effort to emphasize the connection between inclusive pedagogy theory and classroom practice, I will share what I have learned through some of the Mellon grant activities and its application from my experience teaching this new course, as well as more established courses. For instance, I have learned that inclusion does not consist merely of avoiding overtly racist comments that can be considered "micro-aggressions," but comprises encouraging students to value their experience as a minority group inside and outside of the classroom. This translates into facilitating students' participation in their own learning by reflecting on their personal and social racial-ethnic identity through class projects such as presentations and essay writing. In addition, we in Hispanic Studies need to find a balance between mainstreaming our heritage students into learning Spanish language and culture with our white majority language learners and creating courses to meet their own individual needs to improve their academic skills.

Keywords

Heritage speakers, racial-ethnic identity, circles of understanding,
Latino vote

At a time when higher education is experiencing unprecedented nationwide growth in populations of students of color, it is crucial to talk about inclusive practices in general. I joined the Humanities cohort that was recruited to learn about inclusive pedagogies through a number of key events on our campuses supported by a Mellon Grant during 2016-2017. Among these events was a two-day Inclusive Pedagogy workshop led by Dr. David Concepción in May 2016. In September, a Circles-of-Understanding workshop was led by Janet Rowles, and, in October, CSB President Mary Dana Hinton did a public interview of Dr. Beverly Tatum regarding her racial identity development work and its psychological effects for teaching and advising of students of color. Also in October, Blane Harding led a workshop called Fostering an Inclusive Community through Advising. Finally, in February, there was a reading group of the book *Teaching across Cultural Strengths* by Alicia Chávez and Susan Longerbeam, which promotes a balance between Integrated and Individuated Cultural Frameworks in College Teaching.

Before I was introduced to inclusive pedagogy, I had committed a “micro-aggression,” defined as unintended racist comments (Burns), without even being aware of it. I once asked a black student whose Spanish was very good if she was from the Bahamas because I had assumed she could not possibly be a black American student as I previously assumed that they were usually not very good at learning Spanish. Since then, I have corrected that misperception.

Furthermore, I have learned that inclusion does not merely consist of avoiding “micro-aggressions,” but encompasses any pedagogical approach that allows all students to feel like they are active contributors to their own learning experience. However, I paid particular attention to those approaches that apply to students of color and more specifically to heritage learners of Spanish. In this case, the

focus is on encouraging students to value their experience as a minority group inside and outside of the classroom. This in turn translates into facilitating students' participation in their own learning by reflecting on their personal and racial-ethnic identity through class projects and assignments such as presentations, discussions, and essay writing.

Most importantly, exposure to inclusive pedagogy has made it possible for me to establish connections between inclusive pedagogy theory and classroom practice as we in Hispanic Studies struggle to find a balance between two very different learning scenarios. The department of Hispanic Studies at CSB/SJU has seen a tremendous growth of the number of Hispanic heritage students interested in pursuing majors or minors in our field. For several years, we have been mainstreaming our growing number of Hispanic heritage students into learning Spanish language and culture with our white majority language learners. Our department had just decided to introduce a new two-credit course for advanced Spanish speakers geared to heritage speakers, which I volunteered to teach as a pilot in Fall 2016 to meet the specific needs of these students. Although most of them tend to have high oral skills, they need to improve their academic presentational and writing skills. In what follows, I will give concrete examples of inclusive pedagogy strategies I applied to my direct experience with each of these two models.

During Dr. Concepción's Inclusive Pedagogy workshop in May, we were asked to examine the syllabus of a course that we intended to improve by using inclusivity principles. At the time, I was preparing to teach HISP 212, an Intensive Reading course which is the first in a three-course sequence aimed at preparing our majors and minors to take electives by practicing reading, writing, and discussion skills. In this course, I ask students to read literary texts of different genres by various Latin American authors from a number of Spanish speaking countries. Although most heritage speakers are at an advantage in their level of Spanish reading comprehension compared to their non-heritage peers, the majority of students at this level find it difficult to analyze literary texts, particularly if they have not been exposed to them through Advanced Placement courses.

One of the points emphasized in the Concepción workshop was to reach learning goals incrementally starting from the final product by incorporating functional steps from lower to higher functions that match the skills being developed. As I applied this strategy, I became aware that to meet the goal of being able to closely analyze sentence structure and word function to determine meaning, I should not expect students to read a text on their own outside of class and come to class prepared to discuss it after answering questions about its structure, symbols, tone, and message outside of class. Instead, I decided to have them work in groups during class time on a paragraph that was difficult to understand by determining what issues about a particular sentence they could not figure out and why. I figured that this type of exercise would require teamwork by putting together the strengths some students have achieved in applying their knowledge of grammar from previous language courses, while helping others overcome their weaknesses. At the same time, it would create cooperation between those students whose comprehension of Spanish was stronger with those whose critical thinking skills were more developed. When I experimented with this technique, I found that it brought reading to the forefront as a process instead of as an end result.

In the case of my HISP 313, Spanish for Advanced Students course, which is the two-credit course geared to heritage speakers I offered as a pilot during CD mod in Fall 2016, Dr. Concepción's workshop provided me with other useful ideas. Although I had had plenty of experience teaching introductory formative courses for the Hispanic Studies major/minor, I did not expect the high diversity of levels of Spanish language skills and contact with different aspects of Hispanic cultures that I found within a small sample of seven students: two males and five females. Their language skills and cultural knowledge ranged from a student who had a rich vocabulary and was highly knowledgeable of cultural aspects to a student whose level of Spanish was much lower than the rest of the students and was not acquainted with basic information on Hispanic cultures. Also, partly because I was desperate to recruit students for the pilot and partly out of an attempt at inclusivity, I included a student whose schedule was

partially in conflict with the time of the class by having her work with me individually in my office to catch up with the work she missed, and two students who were seniors not intending to apply the course to a major or minor, as well as one who had already taken my HISP 212 introductory course for majors and minors.

One of the strategies emphasized at the workshop when building a syllabus for the course was connecting course material to students' interests and inviting them to participate directly in defining those interests. When I started planning the readings to support the discussion and writing assignments in HISP 313, I did not know what topics I should include that would engage my Latino students. I opted for the following three topics: "My Bi-Cultural Story," "The Latino Vote," and "The Quinceañera Tradition." The first topic was meant as a reflection on each student's cultural identity to help them to know one another as well as give me basic information on each student's background. The Latino Vote was related to a series of guest lectures organized by the Latino/Latin American Studies minor program which took place in the first part of the fall semester in preparation for the upcoming presidential election. The "Quinceañera" tradition was an attempt to explore a highly popular celebration that has a deep significance among Latinos in the U.S. When I asked the students which topics interested them, first of all, they seemed surprised that I would ask them what topics they wanted to include in the class instead of just telling them what those topics were. Although they were interested in the topics I presented to them, they told me they were more eager to learn about the folklore and history of Latin American cultures, as these were topics they never had a chance to learn as American students. As a compromise between my Latino topics and their Latin American culture topics, we agreed to use the assigned topics for the three essays they were to write and let them select a topic of their choice for their final research paper.

This follows Veronica Loureiro-Rodriguez's 'Meaningful Writing' approach to Heritage Learners of Spanish, which encourages "a learning experience that pays attention to students' experiences and emotions, and not just to their cognitive and measurable skills" (45). This focus

is consistent with encouraging students to value their experience as a minority group inside and outside of the classroom. In turn it translates into facilitating students' participation in their own learning by reflecting on their personal and racial-ethnic identity through class projects such as presentations and essay writing.

As it turned out, the assignments revolving around these topics taught me a few things about my students' engagement with both improving their language skills and learning about Hispanic cultures. First of all, the use of "circles of understanding" for discussion proved very effective for sharing personal experiences. As explained by Kraybill and Wright, in this group process:

The group sits in a circle. The leader or "circle keeper" states a focusing question or topic. Then the leader passes a "talking piece"—any object that is easy to hold, such as a stone, a feather, a crystal, a stick or piece of carved wood, even a pen—to the person sitting next to him or her. The speaker addresses the group while others listen in complete silence. When the speaker is finished, the speaker passes the talking piece to the next person. The talking piece makes its way around the circle—most speak but one or two choose to "pass"—and returns to the leader. (14)

Although I had a basic knowledge of this technique, based on my reading of Kraybill and Wright's book given to me by a colleague, I had never tried it in class. Even after attending the Circles workshop offered to the Humanities cohort, I must confess that I was intimidated by the idea of leading a circle. However, just having my small class of seven sit in a circle for the first time to introduce each other had the effect of eliciting the sharing of personal experiences in what felt like a natural way. For the rest of the class discussions, rather than a discussion of the articles I had assigned students to read on each topic, I found myself listening to stories about how they individually affected each one of them.

For instance, for the "My Bi-Cultural Story" assignment, I gave students a questionnaire with questions regarding cultural identity at

a personal level. For class discussion I had students in a circle where, as I mentioned above, I loosely followed some of the techniques of the circles of understanding format with considerable success. The students were eager to share their experiences and talk about their strong desire to explore their diverse bi-cultural identities. One of the most enlightening topics was that of being “First-generation students,” which put many students in a position of great responsibility toward their families. As Kavitha-Cardoza points out, students whose parents did not go to college face several unique challenges; sometimes they feel guilty because, now that they have a high school diploma, they should get a job and help support the family. This results in the students being less likely to have confidence in their academic abilities. I wholeheartedly agree with this author’s conclusion that “Any serious plan to help these smart, thoughtful young people who have already overcome so many obstacles to get to college must include strategies to address the social, emotional and cultural aspects of their lives.” There was a particular story I found extremely moving of a first-generation student who was worried because her parents are undocumented and if they were to be deported, she would be in charge of her younger brother. However, her biggest concern was that her brother would have the same chance at receiving higher education as she did.

Dealing with “The Quinceañera,” a celebration of a girl’s introduction to society as a woman, taught me that I could not simply engage in criticism of the celebration on the basis of it being sexist and commercialized, because this was an emotionally charged topic. On the day we were to discuss this topic, I was greeted by a signature song used for “Quinceañeras” that was being played as I entered the classroom. I was very interested in listening to the whole song, including the lyrics, as well as another one sung by a female singer. I also benefited from a student who shared the pictures of her “Quinceañera” and proudly explained that she broke with tradition by wearing a deep purple dress instead of the expected pastel colors and by only having male companions (chambelanes) instead of the typical cohort of 15 girls and 15 boys. Not having experienced a “Quinceañera” of my own, as I forewent mine for a trip, I was treated to a complete explanation of

each of the rituals that are part of the celebration, such as the change of shoes from flat to high heels and the transfer of the doll from the oldest to the younger sister. I also was surprised that the justification to counter the argument of sexism was that boys had the choice of a “Quinceañera” celebration if they wanted one. Overall, I had to keep in mind that this celebration acquires a more crucial meaning for Latinos in the U.S. who are at an age when they must reflect on their cultural identity as both American and Hispanic.

Regarding the class materials, I found that the choice of articles and presentations I assigned about each of the topics was not very effective. I assume this was due to the fact that the students felt detached from them. Specifically on the “Quinceañera” tradition, using the 2006 Richard Glatzer y Wash Westmoreland film *Quinceañera* confirmed what I knew about students of color being more relational. This means needing to relate academic experiences to their lived or personal experiences. As Chavez and Longbeam explain in their book *Teaching across Cultural Strengths*, the predominant individuated culture in college teaching stands in contrast to a more integrated cultural framework that characterized the traditional learning of most students of color within their families and communities. These authors describe the lack of balance between a tendency to focus on individual competence centered on the mind as the main conduit of knowledge and a linear conception of the world and a more interconnected approach that values body, spirit, and emotions and favors learning by doing and listening to other’s experiences (8).

In addition to the circle in which each student related the meaning of the celebration to their own experience, I had a hands-on exercise where students were in charge of presenting to the class the characteristics of a specific character from a movie. To my surprise, students were more engaged with the fictional characters than they were with the actual facts. What students did differed from the assignment expectations because they had all had a direct or indirect experience with the tradition we were addressing. That meant that they felt compelled to relate to the material in a highly personal way.

Besides providing opportunities for the students to practice their academic writing in Spanish, I had picked the topic of the Latino vote for its relevance due to the election. I must say that I expected Latino undergraduate students to be highly politicized and knowledgeable about political issues affecting their communities, particularly during an election year. On election-day we had discussed the articles I had assigned on the development of Latino political engagement and I sensed a lack of knowledge both about the development of the Latino vote and the history of Latino political struggles as well as about key issues of the current campaign affecting Latinos. To my dismay, their level of knowledge was not very complete, but mostly based on what was presented to them by the media during the electoral campaign or what they had heard from family and friends. This was confirmed when I attended a Latino/Latin American Studies event on Latinos' political views in which the four panelists reflected their general lack of awareness on political and economic issues as well as their lack of confidence in expressing their opinion.

We decided to continue the discussion on the Latino vote after we found out the results of the election. During the class session after election day we sat in a circle and I asked the students to go around sharing their reaction to the results. To my surprise, four students, all women who seemed disengaged on Tuesday, appeared very shaken and expressed their views with great passion. Some who have parents or other relatives who are undocumented conveyed anxiety, fear, disappointment, and distrust. They were shocked and incredulous that someone who upheld racist and sexist ideas so openly could become a model for the whole country, thus encouraging hatred as acceptable and even admirable. However, in the midst of these negative feelings, there were voices of hope that saw this as a time to become more aware that racism surrounds us and that the younger generations must become more politically active to fight against it. Beyond the issue of how the election results will affect them personally or their families, there was the issue of how to effectively face attacks by those emboldened by the racist speech that was part of the campaign.

In this respect, the techniques of the “theater of the oppressed” learned by a group of students in our Guatemala study abroad program could be an extremely helpful tool. After coming back from their study abroad experience, this group decided to invite their instructor to our campus for a workshop and public presentation of a skit written by the students and based on an incident that had occurred in the recent past. The incident involved heritage students that felt demeaned because a group of white students acted as border patrol officers at a party making fun of Hispanic immigrants in the U.S. After the skit, students were invited on stage to come up with solutions to the conflict between the two groups of students. The study abroad participants then repeated this performance by creating a group called RAD (Reflection, Action, Dialogue).

In his article on black male student success in higher education, Shaun Harper mentions that one of the ways to engage students of color in college life is by supporting ethnic student organizations and encouraging engagement in and out of the class. After the election, there was an opportunity to participate in the march of solidarity organized by Campus Ministry that took place on the CSB campus. Although I was disappointed that some students did not participate in the march even though I let them leave the class earlier, I enjoyed marching alongside those most involved in Campus Ministry. In light of the discussions that had taken place through the faculty discussion list on campuses as sanctuaries, this march was an important first step in making students feel safe in our campus in the face of what is to come in terms of changes in immigration policies. In connection to this, four days after the election, I enjoyed the great pride four of my students felt when our class watched their performance in the Festival of Cultures presenting both traditional and contemporary dances. Both experiences taught me that outside of class activities are highly important to develop trust by sharing common concerns. I confirmed this later, when shortly after the 2016 election, there was an incident where a group of students joined in chanting “build that wall” which resulted in a rally attended by a large group of students of color as well as white students who shared their outrage. Specifically, it was highly

rewarding to have one of my Hispanic heritage students email me to let me know he would be absent from class that day because he was helping organize the rally. This same student came to tell me during a performance of the east Los Angeles musical group “Las Cafeteras” that he had listened to the group online and was overjoyed when he found out they were coming to campus. He was even happier when I reminded him that he could receive extra credit for the class if he wrote a reflection on his experience at the concert.

Regarding written assignments, I wrongly assumed that as heritage speakers my students all wrote and spoke better than the average Spanish learner. Three essays and one research paper were too many for a two-credit course, which meant there was not enough time to review them individually outside of class. In addition, I do not know if it was because many students were taking this course as a labor of love while having to work on their required courses, but I found that it was hard to get them to turn in their work on time and show up for their appointments.

However, at the end of the course they all surprised me with the level of commitment they showed in working on their final paper and presentation. I could tell they really enjoyed their research and pursuing topics about which they were passionate. Instead of choosing topics from my list of suggestions related to Latino communities in the U.S., including the prevalence of obesity, media stereotypes and participation of Hispanics in politics, sports, or education, they all selected an aspect of Latin American cultures that was close to their hearts. For example, one student presented several legendary family stories told by her father about his Mexican rural community of origin. Another student did research on Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, whom she admired, and yet another one on traditional Aztec dances. One more described the popular culture around drug dealers perceived as heroes through music. Outside of Mexico, a student of Dominican heritage presented her findings on the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic, and another student presented on the recruiting of children soldiers in Colombia’s civil wars.

Before attending our CSB president's interview with Dr. Beverly Tatum, the Mellon Humanities cohort had read her book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*. Although her ideas are geared specifically toward black students, they became a major theoretical stronghold for me as I have found they have direct application to other students of color. Tatum explains that through the development of their racial identity, students of color go through a stage characterized by "a strong desire to surround oneself with symbols of one's racial identity, and actively seek out opportunities to learn about one's own history and cultures with the support of same race peers" (76). Later on, many students become more immersed in a diverse community and some engage in leadership. Although she ultimately sees these stages as a continuum, I have posited them as opposites in the title of this article by identifying them with the tension I described earlier between mainstreaming heritage and other advanced learners of Spanish into classes geared to non-heritage students and creating courses to meet the individual needs of heritage learners.

In considering these two options, I agree with Tatum that it is not a matter of either/or, but of when. In a discussion with my colleagues from Hispanic Studies one of them pointed out that perhaps the first semester in the preparatory sequence before majors and minors take elective courses, HISP 212, was too early to mainstream. I tend to agree with her, and I believe that the best time is probably when students have taken introductory courses and start taking electives because the disparity in language skills is not as sharp any more. However, there are exceptions since a good number of heritage speakers would definitely benefit from the introductory courses. This has become apparent in the case of some students in my HISP 212 intensive reading course as well as in my HISP 313 pilot course, which reveals the need to find more accurate ways to place students into the appropriate language level class. Specifically, the skill level acquired by being a member of a Hispanic family where Spanish is spoken on a daily basis is not to be dismissed because the student has not taken an AP exam.

Finally, for the sake of inclusivity, I think that a course such as HISP 313 should be open not just to those heritage students/immersion students who plan to major or minor in Hispanic Studies, but to those who just want to take the class to fulfill a General Education requirement, as an opportunity to share their cultural identity with other advanced students of Spanish. As a native of Mexico who came to the U.S. as a graduate student, this experience helped me understand the urgency of Spanish heritage speakers to re-affirm their Hispanic heritage in the midst of an irresistible trend to get absorbed into the American mainstream culture.

Even though I was teaching a section of the HISP 212 Intensive Reading course that prepares students for the major and minor in Hispanic Studies in Fall of 2016 at the same time as I was teaching HISP 313, I introduced relatively few changes that semester. But when teaching it again in the spring of 2017 to a group of 20 students that included six Spanish heritage speakers, I introduced significant changes. When three of the five men in this minority group sat together, it confirmed Beverly Tatum's observations in her book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*.

Since in my courses I already select inclusive texts and have been doing group exams, what I did to add inclusivity was to include more group activities in class that involved vocabulary and grammar and connected them with the reading of the texts in groups during class time with emphasis on reading comprehension.

An example of activities I added was going through vocabulary words in class as opposed to having students look up the words outside of class on their own or doing exercises on grammar points in class instead of just having students review the grammar outside of class on their own. That was rewarding because when they answered questions about the readings, I could tell they had understood the questions better because the students did not make so many mistakes in explaining the content.

In addition, after completing each reading, I devoted one additional day of class to varied activities related to them in order to help students absorb their meaning more thoroughly. Previously, I had devoted those days to essay conferences, which instead I did outside of class time.

Some of these activities reinforced what the students had covered in their presentations. For example, when we read a Chilean play on the interaction between a woman of the upper classes and her domestic employee, I had students watch a clip of life in the slums of Chile; they also read a short newspaper article regarding a change in the law related to domestic employees' working conditions, as well as analyzed a picture from a photo-novel to examine the plots of popular romance novels. As a result, students were able to connect the topics of the presentations with the analysis of the texts, which was a step above the reading comprehension demonstrated in the questions. This was evident in the first of two group exams the class took after our first two readings, in which students demonstrated a more in-depth understanding of the social and economic relationships between the characters in the play.

These changes in turn have allowed me to create a more inclusive environment in and out of the classroom by decreasing the gap between two distinct groups of students who take courses within our HISP 212-311-312 preparatory sequence for Hispanic Studies majors and minors. On the one hand, there is a group of students who come to our classes with the idea that we are all about teaching a foreign language. This group comprises those heritage Spanish speakers that are more fluent because they have been exposed to spoken Spanish on a regular basis through their family and communities of origin. They discover that the ability to express themselves clearly and effectively involves more than casual conversation and emails and requires them to engage in critical thinking and reflection around texts they have considered boring. At the same time, this cohort comes to appreciate their Hispanic heritage through feeling they have cultural insights they can share with their non-heritage classmates.

On the other hand, there is a group of students who come with a better understanding of the expectations and assumptions of the Humanities and the value of a liberal arts education. This group also comprises a number of heritage Spanish speakers who have taken AP courses and have a better command of academic Spanish. Together, both groups, through class activities, presentations and group exams, come to listen to each other “with the ear of the heart,” and learn to “challenge one another respectfully.”

An example of this was when a group of three heritage students gave a presentation on Mexico as part of a group of five SJU students to introduce a Mexican film and another student asked where in Mexico his family originated. Then other heritage students went on to tell the class where their families came from and suddenly the class turned into a lively exchange.

In trying to decide whether to mainstream our heritage students into learning Spanish language and culture with our white majority language learners or create courses to meet their own individual needs to improve their academic skills, I would opt to have the best of both worlds, as I strongly believe both sets of students can benefit from both types of experiences.

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