

Public Abstract

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With this qualitative study I attempted to understand the learning experiences of older Latino/as who attended four-year, predominantly white campuses in the Midwest. I met with eight learners between the ages of 35-50, evenly divided by gender, all first generation students. Their family origins include Mexico, Bolivia, Argentina, and Puerto Rico. Each participant had completed at least two years' of college credit.

We adopted an interactive interview style, sharing personal experiences and impressions with one another. To enhance my learning, I used two different frameworks for data analysis--a theoretical lens (critical postmodernism) and a conceptual model (Donaldson and Graham's 1999 A Model of College Outcomes for Adults.) My dissertation describes them holistically--not simply as students but as adults who manage numerous life roles at home, work, school, church, college, and in the community.

The participants shared fascinating life journeys, centered on their respective families. They believe that education is "the key" to better jobs and improved living conditions for Latino families and are committed to helping others realize life goals. Some explained how they were trying to "fit in" with the dominant US culture, while others described a more bi-cultural (meaning two, not blended) approach to their lifeworld. All of the learners experienced discrimination at different points in their lives, including in college classrooms.

Their voices teach us that (a) students and instructors must clarify expectations, (b) methods must meet adult learners' needs, and (c) discrimination must be challenged. These students found it helpful when instructors recognized cultural differences by country of origin; acknowledged their efforts to concurrently learn English; reassured them about accents, verbal skills, and being understood by others; and validated that they are intelligent and capable of comprehending new concepts, even though were not proficient English speakers. As these older students demonstrate, people who immigrate to the US as Spanish speakers can persist across decades to earn college degrees.