

The History of Ethnic Studies and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Faculty Collaboration and Building Learning Communities Beyond the Classroom

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Why Did We Create This Innovation?

Inspiration

Four faculty members from Asian American, Chicano and Chicana, and Africana Studies explore the histories of Ethnic Studies at CSUN and the mission to teach first year composition in our departments—specifically, analyzing what it means to teach writing from an Ethnic Studies perspective and examining the following:

- ❖ High impact teaching practices aimed at improving student learning common across disciplines;
- ❖ Academic innovations in our individual classrooms coalescing into shared pedagogies and practices;
- ❖ The importance of collaborative research across Ethnic Studies disciplines, which has built a sense of love, community *and belonging* among like-minded faculty and students.

In spring 2015, we shared preliminary research findings at a national conference and with CSUN students and faculty; since the founding of our departments in 1968, culturally relevant pedagogies have been at the core of our classroom practices and in our work with first year writing and beyond.

Mission/Goals

Across Ethnic Studies departments, our collective mission focuses on

- ❖ The educational needs of our students and their rich “funds of knowledge” (Moll et al. 1992);
- ❖ Social justice perspectives (Gutierrez 1973; Freire 2000);
- ❖ The dynamic, rich cultures of our students and their communities.

Further, our students are

- ❖ Multilingual (who may be learning English as a second or third language);
- ❖ Immigrants, who may be both documented and undocumented;
- ❖ First generation;
- ❖ Low income;
- ❖ Underrepresented in higher education;
- ❖ Needing to strengthen their academic skills.

Our students are typically from the greater Los Angeles area yet are often from culturally isolated communities. Our goal is to tailor our classroom practices around culturally relevant pedagogies that connect to our students, their communities, and their day-to-day concerns. We focus on classroom pedagogies and best practices to prepare students for academic success.

Closing the Achievement Gap

For 48 years since our founding, we offer courses of study that invite students

- ❖ To critically examine their cultures and cultural practices;
- ❖ To explore their histories and experiences as working class, racial and ethnic subjects vis-à-vis white dominant culture/society; and
- ❖ To study their heritage languages, (and for some) while acquiring L2 proficiency.

These foci are the pedagogical innovations particular to Ethnic Studies departments. Engaging students historically, and putting histories, into context allows them to develop critical thinking skills and motivates them toward academic success.

Theory/Evidence/Research

Theories that inform our research and classroom practices include

- ❖ Social justice (McLaren 2016)
- ❖ Critical Race Theory and Critical History (Delgado et al. 2001; Kelley 2003).
- ❖ Indigenous, Asian American, Latino and African American Rhetorics (Baca 2009; Mao and Young 2008; Moreno 2002; Villanueva 1993; Richardson and Jackson 2007).

Using our histories and these theoretical perspectives, we are designing curriculum that will bring students from three departments together in conversation through common readings, assignments, activism, activities, and writing. In measuring student success, we radicalize current assessment practices that compartmentalize outcomes; instead, we aim for holistic, formative assessments.

What is the Innovation We Created?

Who

Our collaboration began with the Early Start Writing program (EWS), when we designed curriculum to orient students to readings and assignments in first year Ethnic Studies courses. With funding from Undergraduate Studies, we focused our common pedagogy on several readings from Ta-Nehisi Coates' prize-winning “The Case for Reparations,” along with writing assignments and a qualitative assessment at the program's conclusion. With funding from the Provost's Office, our collaboration continued on a project entitled, “Teaching Writing from an Ethnic Studies Point of View.” Extending the conversation from EWS, we focused on integrating race/ethnicity, histories of Ethnic Studies, and culture into classroom readings, conversations, and assignments. We presented the research at a national conference and at CSUN. The presentation impressed upon students (and others in the audience) that

- ❖ The student, staff, faculty, and community activism went into the making of Ethnic Studies;
- ❖ Activism/activist traditions create powerful contexts for students' educational successes.

What

Creating historical and culturally relevant assignments allows students to engage critically and thoughtfully and to become active agents of change and agents in their own education. Examples of active engagement and critical thinking and writing include the following:

- ❖ Faculty and students from Asian American Studies travelling with Chicano and Chicana Studies students and faculty to Tucson, AS and Nogales, Mexico to understand, learn and write about HB 2281, the bill that banned Ethnic Studies in the state.
- ❖ A reading, writing and research project in Chicano and Chicana Studies invited students to examine the histories of Ethnic Studies and culminated in the “Before I Die” project, posters displayed across campus where students shared their hopes, inviting them to practice qualitative research and understanding “that part of the answer [to living in a violent, racist society] is to love one another, to struggle together and not in isolation” (Kelley 2016).
- ❖ In Africana Studies, a composition class gives credence to the relationship between language/dialect and writing by exploring questions of power, language, and culture in the academy and by engaging formal and informal writing, visual media literacy, Twitter, Instagram, and the conventions of writing.

Learning experiences, like these, highlight what Ball calls the importance of creating “a space for affect in the classroom—a place for feeling” that can importantly engage students' critical skills.

How

Collaboration works through creative, meaningful and purposeful inspiration. Our goal was to collaborate on the pedagogical commonalities of teaching writing in Ethnic Studies departments, which in many ways was developed in response to hegemonic attitudes and racism of the academy—where “we are in but not of the institution.” We explored commonalities by “remembering” shared histories of struggle, which grew out of student, faculty and community activism. We found that teaching writing in our departments is paramount to connecting to students, providing them with a “home,” giving them voice for (historicizing) their trauma and experiences, and thus building their skills sets to ensure success in the classroom and beyond. Particulars of how our project came to be include:

- ❖ Collaborating and connecting through shared histories of struggle, trauma and love;
- ❖ Understanding our students as racialized subjects;
- ❖ Presenting our research (even getting funding for our research); and
- ❖ Using our research to perform interventions, like punitive assessments capturing narrow snapshots of students' vast “funds of knowledge.”

What Impact Does the Innovation Have on the Achievement Gap at CSUN?

Real Student Impact

In a reflective essay from Asian American Studies, Ana Cortez observes, “Knowing that there are educators who care about how people are different and how [people] can work together to succeed is something I never learned about in high school. Learning the history of struggle of people of color made me feel more responsible about being a college student. I am part of the dream that MLK Jr. lived and died for and the dream many CSUN professors want to keep alive. My education has more meaning and I want to succeed not only for myself, but for all people of color. I will share what I learned with others.”

Markers of Positive Impact

For first-generation, low-income, underrepresented students, cultivating self-esteem and pride is crucial to the learning process.

- ❖ Closing the achievement gap begins with motivating students to value learning.
- ❖ Once students are motivated and inspired they are more likely to succeed academically.
- ❖ Measuring what students expect from a course in ethnic studies at the beginning of the semester, and measuring what they learned and how they can apply it to their academic success at the end of the semester is a foundational way to measure the positive and long term impacts a culturally informed pedagogy can provide.



In Conclusion

The university is not an engine of social transformation. Activism is.

—Robin D. G. Kelley (2016)



Introducing students to the origin histories/stories of the Africana Studies and Chicano/a Studies departments in 1968 and connecting these histories/stories to the development of Asian American and Central American studies begins a transformative process for students, where as readers and writers, they enact social change and promote social justice. Black, Latino, and Asian American students understand that the sacrifices and the protests of earlier generations paved the way for their presence and the presence of faculty of color on campus. Many of our students major in other disciplines yet report that they find a sense of “home,” belonging, love, and connection in our departments. We assert that these aspects of our departments foster and nurture students and in turn influences their persistence rates in college.

How Could This Impact More CSUN Students?

How Could This Be Scaled?

Our research finds that more work (*and funding*) is needed to encourage instructors to engage activist traditions, “multicultural” readings, critical thinking about race and racism, and conversations reflecting who are students are. Some strategies include helping instructors develop pedagogies that

- ❖ Speak to the material realities of students' lives and their positionality (vis-à-vis identity, race, gender, sexuality, class and ethnicity) and
- ❖ Validate students' identities, needs, and goals.

Engaging in reflective practices when developing curriculum invites instructors

- ❖ To encourage students to write reflectively about who they are; what they are finding in their university education, and what they want to learn;
- ❖ To encourage students to be “truth seekers”—to ask questions about how they relate experiences to course content;
- ❖ To empower students to think and apply knowledge of rhetoric, composition, reasoning, and critical thinking skills inside and outside the walls of the classroom and into their communities;
- ❖ To provide students tools to take action and become involved on campus and to understand that they can make tremendous contributions to the ongoing struggle for liberation and social justice for all oppressed people;
- ❖ To further the mission of social justice reflected in the activist spirit of the founding of Ethnic Studies departments.

Future Partners

- ❖ Like-minded CSUN professors who are interested in social justice pedagogy.
- ❖ Grant application to Institute for Education Sciences.

Thoughts to Think

An important guiding question to think about as instructors revise their curriculum is, “What kinds of literacies do students (who are first generation, low income, and underrepresented) need to negotiate the educational, social and political landscapes in local and national contexts?” Other questions include, what historical legacies do our students bring with them to classroom experiences; how do we acknowledge the students' “funds of knowledge” (multilingualism, biculturalism, etc.) in all aspects of classroom instruction and evaluation/assessment?

- ❖ For African American students, whose legacy includes slavery and struggles gained in the modern Civil Rights Movement, they are pursuing higher education because “this is how you asserted yourself as a free person; how you claimed your humanity. You pursued learning so you could work for social uplift, for the liberation of your people. You pursued education so you could prepare yourself to lead your people” (Anderson, in Delpit 38-9).
- ❖ “[I]t is in the poetics of struggle and lived experience, in the utterances of ordinary folks, in the cultural products of social movements, in the reflections of activists, that we discover the many different cognitive maps of the future, of the world not yet born. However, recovering the poetry of social movements, particularly the poetry that dreams of the new world, is not such an easy task” (Kelley 2002).
- ❖ If your plan is for next year, plant rice. If your plan is for the next ten years, plant a fruit tree. If your plan is for the next one hundred years, educated minds (Confucius).