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Celia Lopez-Chavez
University of New Mexico

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Teaching “The Other Legacy,” Learning About Ourselves: Latin America in Honors

CELIA LÓPEZ-CHÁVEZ, PH.D.

UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO

Education as the practice of freedom denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from men. Authentic reflection considers ... men in the relations with the world. (Freire, 58)

These words, written in 1968 by Paulo Freire in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, were current in the 1960's and still are at the beginning of the 21st century. For Freire, the ultimate goal is that students should learn to practice freedom in the classroom and to be committed to the society in which they belong. According to Freire, values and ideas should be a topic of discussion in the classroom in order for students to reflect on how to transform or create a better society. He states,

Teachers and students, co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators. (56)

In this process of “discovering themselves,” the exposure to “the other” is a crucial part of students’ learning experience. We are who we are in relation to others. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that, through the study of other cultures with which students are not familiar, they learn about themselves, about the historical memory of their own community, and about their connection with the world regarding decisions in a global as well as a personal context. They also learn about their responsibility as citizens, as voters, and as members of a society that is not isolated but is connected to the world’s urgent social and political issues. In this learning process students also reflect about human values. From the perspective of the teacher, the teaching of human values helps students to understand unfamiliar topics. As Stanford Ericksen states,

The ability to relate subject matter with the student’s own aspirations and values is probably one of the defining characteristics of the master teacher it is the constellation of interests, attitudes, and values the subject matter can help to formulate that will remain with students long after factual information and concept labels are forgotten or found to be

TEACHING “THE OTHER LEGACY”

obsolete or irrelevant. The instructor must therefore accept the further responsibility of defining attitudes and values that he (she) believes to be appropriate goals of his/her course. (7, 11-12)

The objective is for students to feel comfortable with “the other” and learn about tolerance and diversity while they explore themselves. Students can learn this through the study of Western and non-Western cultures. Reading Shakespeare, for example, could be a good way to analyze others and ourselves if we learn to study his writings exploring the otherness in them. Someone of non-Western heritage can learn to read Shakespeare looking for those issues and sectors of society that are misrepresented. As Lori Schroeder Haslem affirms in her essay “Is Teaching the Literature of Western Culture Inconsistent with Valuing Diversity?”

It is in the very nexus of your agreements and disagreements with the text that you can learn not only to read Shakespeare or any author but, most important, to read and to understand yourself as a unique person with unique values. (121)

Teaching topics on Latin America is a great way to expose students to the study of the “other.” Since 1996 I have designed and taught six different seminars with Latin American content at the University Honors Program of the University of New Mexico. I have been challenged in my approach to education by the interdisciplinary emphasis used in Honors courses and the fact that students come from many different backgrounds and fields. Because of the nature of this teaching experience I have almost become an expert in simplifying concepts and looking for examples by using different techniques.

The list of seminars that I have designed and taught include titles such as: “Fiction and Non Fiction on the Screen: Latin American History and Literature in Films”; “From Sweet Daughters to Revolutionary Sisters: Women in Latin America”; “Evita: the Woman, the Myth, the Truth”; “Latin American Legacy”; “Race and Mixture in Latin America”, and “Elusive Justice: Human Rights in Latin America.” It is impossible to explain here how I teach each class, but I will summarize the methodology that I have used in some of them by giving specific examples of readings, topics, and students’ products in the form of journals, presentations, research papers, and projects.

Perhaps one of the classes that explore more in depth the concept of “the other” is the Latin American Legacy course. The objective of this seminar is for students to be exposed to, and understand, some of the most important works and writers whose ideas have left a legacy in Latin American and world cultures. The course explores major ideas in literary, historical, artistic, socio-political, and scientific sources that represent the most important characteristics of Latin America, as well as its contributions to the world. Music, literature, cinema, and other forms of art are also part of this course. We finish with the legacy of Latin America in the United States, studying the presence of *latinos* and their cultures in this country.

During the semester students read, reflect, discuss, and write about these issues. We begin the semester getting familiar with the map of Latin America and researching each country’s population, economics, religion, society, ethnicity, and customs. The readings are placed in chronological order and are selected to represent different

moments of history, different places, and different cultures in order to show the diversity and the development of Latin America. At the same time, students use the readings to explore what is unique to Latin America and what it has in common with other cultures. Each reading contributes to these goals.

The reading of the *Popol Vuh* is an effective introduction to indigenous mythology and the creation of the world according to Mayan culture. Through the reading of *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, by Bartolomé de las Casas, students understand the consequences of the European conquest, the violation of human rights, and the importance of voices such as that of Las Casas, who was part of the conquest and denounced its abuses. With this reading students begin to explore themes such as the encounter of different cultures and the beginning of imperialism in Western history. The reading of the writings of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz exposes students to one of the many literary examples from Latin America, in this case from Mexico. The writings of Sor Juana and her life as a woman, living in a patriarchal society and repressed by some of the patriarchal institutions such as the Church, are excellent early examples of feminism in Latin America, as well as the beginning of a national literature. We also read a selection from the book *Facundo or Civilization and Barbarism*, by 19th-century Argentinian writer Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, which is a classic in Latin American literature. Through this reading, students reflect on the following issues: rural and urban cultures, national folklore and foreign influence, nationalism and protectionism versus liberalism and free market, “barbarism” versus civilization.

Contemporary writings on Latin America by U.S. scholars give students other perspectives that contribute to class discussions. The book *Tales of A Shaman's Apprentice* by Mark Plotkin, an ethnobotanist who in the 1970's and 1980's searched for new medicinal plants in the Amazon Rain Forest, exposes students to the benefits, controversies, and possible negative consequences of the Western presence in the Amazon Rain Forest today. A selection of readings on the African presence in the Caribbean gives students another perspective of the legacy. In this case, the legacy of African people in Latin America compared to that in the United States is a valuable lesson. The last part of the class is dedicated to exploring U.S.-Latin America relations and the presence of Latin America in the United States. Many students are surprised at reading for the first time about U.S. military interventions and support to military dictatorships in Latin America in the 20th century. These topics lead us to discuss and express more personal opinions and take a political position on issues such as immigration, political and civil responsibility, human rights, ethnocentrism, and imperialism in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Students' final papers are a good example of the results of this course, for the themes selected are very related to learning about the “other” while at the same time researching topics of their own interest. Students choose the field in which they want to do research. The topics are familiar to them (in many cases related to their majors or minors) but add the Latin American component within the idea of legacy. Papers such as “Sculpture, Society and Politics in Latin America,” “El Barzón: Legacy of Latin American Popular Resistance in the Context of World Globalization,” “Pablo Neruda: A Legacy in Literature and Life,” “Silence, Dehumanization, and Oppression: Indigenous Women in Guatemala,” and “The Latin American Dream in a Globalized-Market Economy” are some examples of the array of topics on which students chose to write.

TEACHING “THE OTHER LEGACY”

For the class “Evita: the Woman, the Myth, the Truth,” one of my students wrote in her journal (fall 2002):

I have never been much for or about politics... I have only begun to understand the importance of Politics in response to Argentina. I guess I just want to first state how much this all makes sense and relates to me now. I see humanity in a whole new view.

This is one of the many comments made by students about how much they learn in this class. Teaching biography is an excellent way to explore the life of a human being and at the same time analyze other issues. (Some of the characteristics of this class and its results were presented in a short article I published in 1998 in *The National Honors Report*.) The lives of Evita and her husband Juan Perón open many topics for discussion. Their biographies create a larger context in which students can express their own views about politics and society. The themes students explore include: charismatic leaders, dictatorships, democracies and populism, presidents’ wives and their roles, and feminism and the women’s movement in Latin America and the United States. Such a context is also an opportunity for students to develop their personal perspectives on other themes such as: gender issues, female and male power, myths, ambition, passion, and fanaticism. The nature of these topics puts students in the position of exploring their inner selves in order to define these concepts and to relate to them.

To teach the class on charisma, I use a technique that has become very successful. Students are asked to create their own individual definition of charisma and to choose one historical or contemporary charismatic leader. Students look for information about the life of the chosen leader and an image of him or her. They then create a one-page handout with all this information. Each student gives a short oral presentation about the leader and writes on a strip of paper his or her most important characteristics. The list is taped to the wall. After the presentations, students go through what was written on the strips and create their own lists of charismatic characteristics. Finally, students compare their lists with the specific cases of Eva and Juan Perón and apply to them all that we have discussed on charisma.

In another activity each student must interview a woman who is old enough to talk of her life or remember the lives of women in the United States during the 1940’s and 50’s, which was the period of Evita’s public life. Each student gives a short oral presentation about the interview, and the class period concludes by summarizing the lives of women in the United States at that time. We then analyze Argentinian women and Evita in this comparative context. This assignment has been successful for many reasons. Some students interview their own grandmothers or other relatives, and they discover and learn about their own family history. In these cases, students have expressed surprise about stories that they learned from their grandmothers. In other cases, students interview women in nursing homes and start close relationships with women they did not know before.

In teaching a biography, all the senses can be involved. Aids such as documentaries, movies, slides, music, recorded speeches, tango lessons, food and *mate* tasting (an

Argentinian tea) help create a more engaged learning experience.¹ Students' final papers and projects showed a diversity of themes and creativity.²

Teaching biography leads us to reflect about many different aspects of human nature. In this seminar we have lively discussions about love, ambition, power, and manipulation. In other words, students learn to reflect on human values. This idea of teaching a biography from different perspectives with the use of multiple strategies can be applied to any other seminar designed for the study of a famous personality (for example, a political leader, a president, an artist, a writer) in Western and non-Western Cultures.

Of the Honors courses that I have taught on Latin America, perhaps there is no other subject to which students can better relate their own experience than the course on human rights. The topic, in itself, is interdisciplinary. The focus can be different each time that the seminar is taught—concentrating, for example, on political issues, economics, social and racial issues, or art. The combination of readings from different disciplines has been very successful in this course. Articles written by historians, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, and art historians help give students different perspectives on the same topic. Students also become familiar with the different terminologies used by the specialists in each field. In addition to this selection of readings, there is a primary reading list that includes examples of different literary

1 Regarding the use of recorded speeches, even though they are in Spanish, students follow Evita's speeches through an English translation that I provide. The speeches are in chronological order. Students analyze her voice and message in different times of her life and circumstances. In this way, students learn to do a critical analysis of political oral communication, even in a different language. There is also a section of the class called "Evita in Fiction." Students have the opportunity to watch two films on Evita and to read a novel about her. Fiction helps many students understand reality. By the time students watch the films and read the novel, they know the real story of Evita. For this section of the class I also assign a two-page fictional essay called "I was there. I met Evita." Students write in the first person and convey stories about how, when, and in what circumstances they met Evita. It is an effective assignment in the way students go beyond history and feel free to use their imagination.

2 One student's project, for example, was the creation of a radio soap opera in the same style as those of the 1940s (as an actress, Evita performed in this type of radio show). The soap opera was called "Heroines of Revolution" and involved research about three revolutionary women in 20th-century Latin America (one of them was Evita). The student wrote an introduction with information about the historical context and a play based on dialogues. The dialogues were recorded on a cassette tape, complete with sound effects and voices. Another project in the same class was the creation of a "zine" called "The Other Half"; in this case the student researched women's issues in the 1940s and 1950s (Evita's era). Among the topics this student researched were health issues, fashion, women in politics (Evita and others), and poetry written by women. One of the most creative research papers written for this class was called "Tango and Eva," in which the student researched how tango is danced. The paper combined the topics of dance and politics in three areas: the life of Eva Perón called "A Dance in the Life"; the meaning of tango and the roles that male and female dancers play called "The Politics of the Dance"; and Juan and Eva Perón's relationship in this context called "A Dance of Politics."

TEACHING “THE OTHER LEGACY”

styles (history, testimonial fiction, journalism, a novel, and a book of poetry).³ Readings are combined with documentaries. A Latin American Human Rights Film Festival featuring seven films connected to the themes of the class is also organized.⁴

One of the most interesting topics included in this seminar is that of art and human rights. Since art has a universal value, it becomes an excellent tool in a classroom on a subject that is unfamiliar to students. In Latin America, art is a very common way to contribute to the process of healing and recuperation after many years of systematic violation of human rights. The use of film in the course demonstrates that cinema has been one of the most powerful artistic methods of informing people about this issue. The reading of poetry and the creation of a collaborative poem in class is another successful exercise. A Latin American artist who personally has suffered repression visits this class. She uses her paintings and poems as a way to reflect and educate. An art historian is also invited to speak to students about his research on art and revolution in Latin America.

There are other ways for students to be involved in a course that has topics with which they are not familiar. Students keep journals and reflect personally about the issues that are discussed in class. They feel free to connect the issues to their own lives. They also review the topic of human rights in the daily news. The use of current information about human rights violations in the United States and in the world is beneficial. Students make comparisons between current news and what they are learning about Latin America. There are frequent discussions about human rights issues in the United States and comparisons with the type of violence that exists in this country. Students begin to realize that it is important to take a position on this issue, that we have responsibilities as human beings, and that we should find a way to live up to those responsibilities.

Students' final projects and papers for this course have been outstanding in content and creativity. Because of the specific nature of this class, students feel connected to the issues about which they choose to research and write. Some students have created interesting and artistically well-done paintings using the topic of human rights in Latin America. They complete their assignment with a paper connected to the main theme of the painting.⁵ In a research project called “Drawing Justice: An Investigation of Children’s Perspectives on Children’s Rights,” a student interviewed Mexican children in a bilingual class and asked them to draw illustrations based on the Declaration of Children

3 The texts that I use are: Bartolomé de Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*; Miguel Barnet, *Biography of a Runaway Slave*; Tina Rosenberg, *Children of Cain: The Violence and the Violent in Latin America*; Isabel Allende, *Of Love and Shadows* and *Poetry Like Bread: Poets of the Political Imagination* (an anthology).

4 The films are: *The Last Supper* (Cuba), *The Official Story* (Argentina), *Men With Guns* (United States), *Missing* (US), *Romero* (US), *Che Guevara: the Bolivian Diaries* (Switzerland), and *The Night of the Pencils* (Argentina).

5 One student created a painting with different symbols and images of historical figures who have been leaders of human rights in Mexico. He wrote a paper explaining the painting and giving factual information about each leader. Another student did a painting reflecting the idea of globalization and the foreign debt of Latin American countries that in many cases do not permit them to develop and results in human rights violations. The painting was combined with a paper titled “Debt Relief: Is It An Option?”

Rights which was read to them. In the project “For All Eyes To See,” a student reflected on the importance and influence of Mexican muralists (Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros) on the muralist painters in the Albuquerque area in New Mexico. The student combined her paper with her own photographs of murals all around the city. In the paper and in the selection of murals to photograph, the student focused on those themes related to social, political, and cultural rights. The project titled “When Mothers Fight for Justice” involved research and performance; the student recreated the walk of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who protest their “disappeared” children during the last dictatorship in Argentina.

In the course “Fiction and Non Fiction on the Screen,” students explore Latin American history, literature, and cinema. The readings, discussions, research, and writing on these topics give students the opportunity to reflect about artistic expressions and their interpretations of historical events. Films are selected based on novels that have an historical context. The course became an interdisciplinary introduction to Latin America. This idea can work well for the study of any region, country, or culture.

Art, history, politics, and economics, as well as social, ethnic, and environmental issues, among others, are universal themes to apply to the study of any culture or region in the world. The main goal is to give students a sense of connection with the world and reflect on issues and values that can be applied to any, as well as their own, culture. At the same time, as Honors teachers we cannot forget the importance of emphasizing critical thinking in our students. Throughout all the courses mentioned above students are encouraged to constantly ask questions, to always go beyond the “obvious,” and to be intellectually curious. These classes on Latin America are designed to develop critical thinking in its broadest sense as “the mode of inquiry that challenges cultural biases, inherited assumptions, and uninterrogated ways of viewing the world” (Wiegman and Glasberg, 399, 1-2).

Latin America’s Nobel Peace Laureate, Alonso Pérez Esquivel, reminds us that: “We must understand human rights as being integral, not only the human rights of individuals but the human rights of people, their cultures, roots, and historical memories.” I like to apply this concept to the dynamics of the classroom and look for ways to teach Latin America that can help students to search in themselves for their own historical memory, their own identity; and to exercise in the classroom the practice of freedom that Freire stresses. I strongly believe that these courses can create a huge impact on students’ minds and lives in the same way that Pérez Esquivel has described for all people in the world: “When people assume their history, their historical memory, they stop being spectators”

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TEACHING “THE OTHER LEGACY”

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The author may be contacted at:

University Honors Program
University of New Mexico
University College, 21
Albuquerque, NM 87131

Celialop@unm.edu
505 277-4211 or 505-277-2169