

Report on Teachers' Inquiry Project: Dwelling in the Borderlands Seminar

"To survive the Borderlands you must live sin fronteras; be a crossroads." - Gloria E. Anzaldúa

In *Dwelling in the Borderlands*, classroom teachers, museum educators, and community educators developed common resources in a cross-disciplinary setting, sharing findings and modeling critical analysis, reflective practice, and collaborative learning. Inspired by the [Pilsen Education Plan](#), the series was designed to bring together professionals from different education contexts working with young people from the same neighborhood.

Following are excerpts of participants' voices, threaded together to reflect elements of the five-session seminar.

October 29: Crossing thresholds of learning: Recollections on entering

At this first session we shared stories about a time in childhood, adolescence or adulthood when we entered into some work or place unfamiliar or unexplored.



Some threads from these stories:

- **voices** figured prominently in many recollections - whooping loud voices, ones asking how you are doing, family voices, bosses voices, welcoming or threatening
- **translation** - of medical terms, new practices, between languages, cultures, and knowledge of a new place
- **the body** had a strong presence in our recollections. All the entries were mediated through our bodies. We felt through our bodies, but also our capacities, things we could do, led to new openings and entries.
- **schools** were prominent, and the social organization of schools - rankings - how they confined and defined us. There were several stories related to hiring, starting new jobs, and the uncertainty of that
- **neighborhood** was often the grounding for our stories - how much it shapes and locates us
- It seems that when there was **room for us to be ourselves**, be recognized for who we were as human beings in all our complexity, feel like we belong, be able to explore, be seen as capable and wanting to learn what we needed to, the chances of the entry being a positive opening into a new world were great. There were a number of stories that illustrated the rough entries where minimal trust, recognition or human understanding was much in evidence. We remained "the other" and the entries had qualities of battle or a door almost held shut.
- It made a difference if we had **people by our side** - family, friends, a guide - as we entered.

November 12: Looking at learning in different settings: Museum School object observation and Descriptive Review of Children's Works

OBJECT OBSERVATION: Using a process developed by teachers and museum educators from the New York City Museum School we observed and described several objects brought by participants from the National Museum of Mexican Art, looking closely first independently, then sharing our observations and questions with one another. Together we discussed how to better understand what learning looks like in a museum setting, and how many of the observation skills utilized in a museum setting translate to the classroom environment. We explored how to empower students to discover additional information about objects that connect directly with the



questions they raise, and how this process can be integrated into multiple subject areas.



DESCRIPTIVE REVIEW OF CHILDREN'S WORK - with work of students of community educators Lauren Allen and Henry Cervantes. Responses below are from the group that looked at the work Henry brought in.

The essential question Henry brought to the process is one at the heart of his work: *How do I teach community?* We looked at the collective drawing depicting the qualities of a peacemaker, in places on the body corresponding to those qualities.

Some observations

- The words make the person come to life - through actions
 - stamina - How are you going to continue to be a peacemaker?
 - male figure - he - strength. Wondering if other groups' drawings are female? Are females seen as heroic in these ways?
 - Kids looking at themselves here. Also mirroring us - teachers as peacemakers
 - Makes you wonder what's making them act other than as a peacemaker.
 - teaching community - feelings, takes time, dialogue
- Helps build community among teachers to attend to student work. Also between teachers and students
 - There's not a fixed curriculum about community. Being in community teaches us community.
 - applications organic and dynamic
 - Collectively the students know what qualities an individual needs.
 - I see it now like a topographic map...

November 26: Resistance and solidarity in professional learning communities: Theater of the Oppressed and Peer Observation processes

THEATER OF THE OPPRESSED

For our Theater of the Oppressed we shared stories of conflict we have experienced in the course of our work. We played with one of these stories, involving conflicts of values, generations, and gender, in the construction of a public art space in Little Village. The workshop brought out different voices and perspectives and ways of approaching conflict in many different contexts. We discussed possible applications of Theater of the Oppressed processes. Some ideas were: 1) a means for youth to share and explore their stories; 2) a way for museum visitors to experience conflicts between different artists and schools of art; 3) a way for community members to dialogue about what art means in this community.

PEER OBSERVATION PROCESS

So often in educational settings the process of performance reviews is top-down, centered on areas not directly related to the educator's work with students, and highly judgmental. In this series we introduced a non-judgmental approach for peer observation where the one being observed drives the process. The one doing the observing is the "helper," the "data collector," and the facilitator of dialogue." The central question, issue, or experience to be observed is identified by the educator (the one being observed) in a pre-conference between the educator and the observer. The data collected is presented uninterpreted, enabling the educator to review, interpret, and draw conclusions. Together, the peers discuss the data in a post-conference, reflecting deeply and in a non-judgmental fashion on the data collected.

December 3: Considering identity, language and culture in school community relationships: Close reading of a text and Review of Practice

CLOSE READING of Gloria Anzaldúa *Borderlands* - excerpts from discussion

(from the book) *"Ethnocentrism is the tyranny of western aesthetics. An Indian mask in an American museum is transposed into an alien aesthetic system where what is missing is the presence of power invoked through performance ritual. It has become a conquered thing, a dead "thing" separated from nature and therefore its power."*

(response) I work in a museum. It's my job to bring these dead things back to life. How do I bring it back? How do I make it alive? We are preserving things in the museum, but how do we give them back their power?

(from the book) *"Blocks (Coatlicue states) are related to my cultural identity. The painful periods of confusion that I suffer from are symptomatic of a larger creative process; cultural shifts. The stress of living with cultural ambiguity both compels me to write and blocks me..."*

(response) These moments of confusion/tension are part of life when you live in all these worlds. It is what I am, who I am. There are moments you have to make a decision to be who you are. You live a life of "code switching."

(response) This makes me think of the dichotomy of the (predominantly white) culture I was raised in and the (predominantly Latino) culture I am drawn to and work in in this community. What are my values? How living and working here helps me rethink and reframe my own. How exhausting it is to be going between - shifting values - yet how necessary.

We talked about Borderlands, being in marginal spaces, the back and forth between normal life and art, the ambiguity of creative and ritual time, different stories of cultural borders and boundaries.

REVIEW OF PRACTICE: Miguel Guevera, Rudy Lozano Leadership Academy, Social Studies Applying Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed in Praxis Model

"It's not pretend. No, you're going to write a letter to the mayor now."

Everything starts with: what is your connection here? Ubicación. You can't just say this is important. Practice of sharing stories, building common threads. I take note of these; notice as I go, build curriculum from that.

It's a circle, you can get deeper and deeper. Translating the standards - we do a lot of research, get input on it. Curriculum shouldn't just be developed on your own - you should develop it in a constant collaboration with colleagues, with students. This review process enables us to extend this collaboration - it is very important to get your feedback; coming from you, in this community, that's valuable.

Miguel's questions for colleagues:



What do you see students learning? How are students internalizing and enacting the ideas they are learning about in class? Where/how do you see the curriculum and assessments as authentic? What in this work builds sustainability - in students, in the classroom and school, and in the larger community - so the energy, understanding, and work can continue, deepen and grow?

Colleagues' responses:

- The circle - spiral getting deeper and deeper. You decided on the focus of violence based on students' concerns. You can see that they're *involved* in actions and reflections.
- They're learning critical thinking and analysis - a way of approaching things and learning - this continues itself; students will apply critical



thinking when they read an article, take political action - authentic learning.

- Learning the process of breaking down a problem you see in your life, how to work with others to find a solution. Issues in themselves seem abstract - this is a way of making it real - something I care about and do something about.
- Young people are learning the importance of reading the world beyond the word. They are doing their own thinking.
- The priority on public speaking - speaking out - it keeps building; once you start speaking this way you don't stop.
- You're teaching kids to be intentional with code switching - get ideas out. Knowing how to speak, what language to use.
- Importance of this mode of education at a second chance school - you've been told you're not part of this system; so you analyze the system of sorting and exclusion.
- As a social worker, I referred students to Lozano, and it's powerful to see how much safety you offer them, in the classroom and in the community.
- The process of praxis takes something abstract, like racism, and shows how it comes to be - a cycle, for students to experience that cycle and apply it in different settings.
- You've translated coded language into a living thing. And you've translated coded expectations and made learning real for the people you're working with. Showing the world they're part of. You put lesson plans in front of students, have them help figure it out - making them aware of being in charge of their own education.
- You're a bridge connecting popular education with social studies. You make it real.

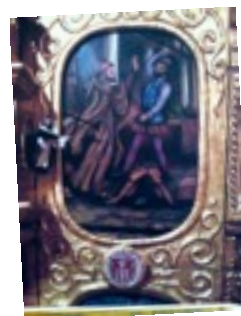
December 10: Defining success in our own terms: creating resources and documentation to sustain the work. For this session each of the participants had tried out one of the collaborative inquiry processes we had used earlier in the seminar in their own work setting with students or colleagues and reported back to the group.

Museum context: Theater of the Oppressed process had these objectives: to bring the art to life; to bring out and process the conflict inherent in the scene other than through a lecture; to focus viewers on one piece, sharing in the viewing as a group; and to get at the motives of the characters in the piece.



Museum context: Object observation process: With this activity, teachers could experience it at their level, then scaffold it back for their students as they know best. Respect for teachers. This activity got to the emotional core of these teachers - they did feel they could work with the art.

Community agency context: Reflection on a word - "future": This is a time when we're thinking about the future of the students we're working with. This process enabled us to refocus on the kid's future.



• **A few closing observations about the seminar and its processes**

- At its best you build a collective understanding that no one came in with.
- Observing the thread of realizations on oneself as a teacher. Thinking more deeply about my own practice as a teacher, about how these processes translate with groups in our own work context.
- Somehow [at work] we get so bogged down by the agenda - taking a moment to reflect on how we're doing and why we're doing what we're doing is valuable.
- Often in PD I'm encouraged to separate my personal feelings and experiences from my professional growth - here, we were encouraged to incorporate them and make them valuable.