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Engaged Pedagogy: Reflections from a Barriologist

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Engaged Pedagogy: Reflections from a Barriologist

Cover Page Footnote

I would to express my gratitude to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Writing group at USD.

Engaged Pedagogy: Reflections from a Barriologist

Rigoberto Reyes

This essay offers advice to University faculty and administrators on how best to implement the work of engaged pedagogy and community development work. The author is an established activist and community organizer for the past 40 years. His most important recommendation when doing the work of community engagement is to begin work that starts and benefits the community.

The University of San Diego established a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Writing group over the past two semesters to write and reflect on engaged pedagogy and I was invited to participate. I agreed to be part of this project because of the relationship, or perhaps the trust, that I had developed with some of the staff and faculty. I write this essay as a community organizer with deep roots in the San Diego – Tijuana border region. I begin my essay with a biography of my life as a way to share how my own story has informed me and framed for me the way I have come to understand and engage in community work. As a result, I conclude this essay with suggestions and recommendations on how academic institutions should understand and engage in community work or what is being defined here as engaged pedagogy.

Childhood in the Border

I was born in San Diego, California in the mid 1950s; my family lived in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico. My parents were divorced when I was eight years old. My mother, looking for a better future for my three siblings and me, decided to migrate to the U.S. I am the youngest of four. We landed in San Ysidro California in 1965, adjusting to a new culture, language and system. At that time, San Ysidro was a small isolated community where everyone knew each other. I would estimate that 90% of the population at that time was “Mexican-American”- the term we used in those days. We moved into an apartment complex, which could be categorized as “projects,” with very limited space and no yard other than a small square of grass in the front, shared among five other families. Life was simple back then. Being raised by a single parent, I had a lot of freedom to experiment, never losing respect or values regarding the appreciation of my family. Slowly, I became a *vago* [wanderer] - always getting in trouble, not caring what time it was, and with the constant reminder from my mother, complaining:

“Donde andabas Chamaco” [Where were you at boy]?

I consistently responded, “por allí” [I was around].

Creating Community

Entering the U.S educational system was a challenge. I knew zero English when we arrived from Tijuana and as a result, was put into a “special class.” Most of the school made fun of the kids in this class. Later on, I realized that I was in a special education class. Back in those days, there was no ESL or equivalent. Since I felt targeted by the other kids, I was compelled to learn English as quickly as possible. By the end of my first year, I was transferred to a regular class.

Most of the kids in San Ysidro hung out at the local park that was next door to the San Ysidro Civic Center. For me, this represented the center of our community; I saw it as my back yard. We did everything there, from playing marbles to basketball on the dirt courts. The “Civic” was definitely the place to be.

The mid sixties brought attention to issues that we had no idea were directly affecting my community. We heard a great deal about the Civil Rights Movement and what was happening in Alabama and eventually came to realize that the African-American community was not the only community being affected by the powerful establishment. Our community also woke up around the same time to similar issues.

The Civic Center was a central place for many meetings and rallies during this era. I remember playing marbles at the park listening to César Chávez rallying farm workers that lived in Tijuana and in the nearby border communities. I had no clue who Chávez was until I heard my *Tío* [Uncle] Lorenzo talking about him.

“Wait a minute,” I told my uncle, “I just heard that *vato* [wanderer]!”

My uncle, who was a farm worker, proceeded to explain to me how Chávez was trying to organize the workers in the agricultural fields for fair working conditions.

Becoming Politicized

In 1969, I entered Southwest Junior High school. The school was experimenting with a new educational approach called bilingual education. I was asked to be part of this program. Thanks to this program, I became fluent in speaking and writing both English and Spanish. Right about the same time, there was turmoil and conflict in the streets and schools. Racial tensions amongst Whites and Chicanos was developing, and I was rapidly becoming a *vato* [wanderer], or so I thought: a cross between a barrio protector of the community and a Chicano radical activist. Being that I was a wanderer, the older teenage kids who were now becoming very active in community issues always mesmerized me. In our neighboring projects, there was a group of young people who were being politicized; they all wore kaki uniforms and called themselves the San Ysidro chapter of the Brown Berets. I was twelve years old at that time in comparison to teenagers who were seventeen to twenty years old. This really got my attention.

As they were practicing, my friend Lencho Flores and me overheard the Berets talking about going to this place in Logan Heights to support another chapter over a dispute they were

having with the city of San Diego. Lencho was more of a *vago* [wanderer] than me and he dared me to go to *La Logan* to see this. Since I had never been north of Chula Vista, I had no idea of the distances or geography of the city so I took the challenge; we jumped on our bikes and three hours later we landed in Logan Heights. I'm not sure if I was proud or dumb to take on the challenge, but I witnessed the second day of the twelve-day take over of Chicano Park in April of 1970. A few days prior to me discovering Chicano Park, my family had been relocated to a new community by the name of Del Sol by Cal Trans and the State of California. What happened to my family is similar to what happened to many Chicano communities, including Logan Heights. The freeways were coming and we were in the way. In Mexico they call it *el reacomodo* [the relocation]. Frequently omitted from history, however, is that no one ever asked us if this is what we wanted, they just did it.

To a great extent, witnessing the take over of Chicano Park was my initiation to activism. Now that I reflect on it, I realize that I am a product of the Chicano movement of the late sixties and early seventies. That is when I came of age and became a Brown Beret in 1975. That same year I also joined the Committee on Chicano Rights, and both of these organizations gave me the formation of community organizing and activism. Lowriding was rapidly becoming a popular activity in my neighborhood, and I was attracted to it through some of the older kids. When I acquired my first car I dropped it to the ground, and I joined the Casinos Car Club of South San Diego and also joined the Chicano Park Steering Committee in 1976 because of my involvement with the berets. This was the foundation of my activism and it has flourished since then.

I have been part of many community based groups and organizations as a member of the board of directors of the Centro Cultural de la Raza in Balboa Park, board member of the San Diego Foundation for Change, founding member of Union del Barrio, co-founder of Amigos Car Club, co-founder of the San Diego Lowrider Council, and board member of the Tommie Camarillo Charter School, among other organizations. For the past 32 years, I have served as the Community Development Director for Via International, where I have been able to develop most of my experience in the community process on both sides of the U.S-Mexico border.

Via International: From Dependency to Development

My involvement with Via International started with invitations from volunteers of the organization in 1984. Via, at that time, was known as Los Niños International and was looking to change its methodology and philosophy in working with communities. Up to this point, the organization had been focusing on direct-aid initiatives in various communities and institutions in Tijuana and Mexicali. Direct aid emphasizes a charity model, creating more dependency and division in the community. In Mexico, this is referred to as *Asistencialismo*. The staff knew they were creating an ethos of dependency and they knew that approach was not working for the people. To a great extent, they felt they were creating divisions and conflicts within the communities. My friend, John Barth, a volunteer of

the organization, invited me to help them make the change, and I was hired because of my experience working and organizing in different Barrios in San Diego. My involvement with grass-roots groups gave me a solid formation to help Via make the transition from a direct-aid organization to an organization following a more successful community development model.

Via International is a community development organization with a mission that focuses on supporting communities' initiatives by encouraging self-determination through "self-reliant projects". The main reason I enjoy this work is because it has contributed so much to my own growth as a person. Most of my knowledge comes from community practices, trial and error, sometimes falling but having the courage to pick myself up and try it a different way. I consider myself a "Barriologist" - a descendent of the street philosophers such as Ramon "Chunky" Sanchez, who proclaims that our knowledge comes from the University of the Streets (UTOP).

Advice from a Barriologist

In my approximate 40 years of working with communities, I have had both good and bad experiences in partnering with universities working in Tijuana, Mexico. I recall one time when a professor from a certain university asked me to assist them in communicating to a grass-roots group in colonia El Tecolote, a community on the outskirts of Tijuana. The professor had identified a problem in the community where there was no electricity to be found. As a result, he and his students were organizing the *colonia* to help them bring electrical services into the area. Community members were supportive of the idea, but there was not much involvement from the people. Hence, I was invited to attend a community meeting and to encourage community participation. Interestingly enough, I came to discover that on that same day, a political leader from the community was organizing another community meeting, focused on bringing water to El Tecolote. As a result, most of the community attended this meeting rather than the meeting focusing on electricity. When the professor asked what had happened, I asked if he had taken the time to ask the community if electricity was their number one priority. After our exchange, it was obvious to me that the community had never been asked. Instead, it was the outside academic's perception that electricity was the priority and not water.

This is clearly a mistake that some university groups make, as people with degrees and authority and perhaps, I venture to add, with a certain know-it-all arrogance, not stopping to recognize that who better to know what the problems, issues and priorities are than the people who are directly being affected by the problem? There are knowledge, traditions and culture that we must learn to respect from such individuals, instead of simply ignoring them based on the assumption that we might know better. I truly believe that any approach to working with community has to engage in a give and take relationship with the community. This is what engagement is all about: truly respecting a community's process, developing

trust and long-term relationships, and above all listening and being true to oneself and the community with whom you work.

I emphasize *with* the community rather than *for* the community. Throughout this process, we need to ask ourselves questions regarding our motivation for doing this type of work. I offer the following questions for academics to reflect and remind themselves to always respect the dignity of the people where they work and serve: Are we doing this work for ourselves, to feel good and pat ourselves on the back, or maybe to show others how good we are? Maybe for spiritual reasons that my church is asking me to give back? Perhaps my institution is requesting my participation as an educator, in order to teach my students true values of working with the needy. If so, we should consider: Do my students really care, or are they motivated by the grade they will receive? As an educator, have I become an entertainer for privileged kids? If so, am I fostering a sense dependency within the community I

am claiming to “serve”? Is my interest a genuine concern for the community, and am I asking the community what are the issues and priorities, or am I suggesting how to resolve the perceived problems that I see to the community? For whom do I do this? Does the community perceive me as researcher and what do I do with this information? Is the community open or tired of being studied? Are we really partners or is it just a title that looks good on paper? Was I invited into the community and if so why was I invited? Maybe I invited myself?

In summary, knowing all of the above, I zero in on the question of needs for the community we claim to work with. Let us make sure that all community needs and goals come from the community with whom a university partners, that the community feels a sense of ownership, and that the community draws from its existing leadership. The role of a university would serve the community best by focusing and learning how best to facilitate this community engagement work.