Chicanos: Beyond the Border; The Creation of a University Class

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Abstract

This presentation focuses on the creation of a class on Chicanos at Webster University in St. Louis, MO. Participants will learn about the topics covered during the 2012 Spring Semester, materials used and class content. Learning objectives discussed will include: To expose students to multiple cultural perspectives based on original materials; To communicate critically and sensitively with people from another culture through an understanding of one’s own culture; To reflect on one’s own time, culture and place in the world; To reflect on authentic materials such as songs, films and virtual interviews with authors; To express values and complex thoughts in writing; To question cultural stereotypes; To read critically and analytically.

Learning outcomes to be discussed will include: Discuss and analyze the syndrome of physical and spiritual destierro (alienation) that the Mexican and Mexican-American populations experience as depicted in the novel Peregrinos de Aztlan; Compare and contrast the search for meaning and identity in the Mexican and Mexican-American cultures; Develop and design individual presentations on biculturalism, its sociolinguistic implications and man’s origin and destiny; Evaluate the sociocultural impact of the Mexican migration through the use of authentic materials; Compose and write critical papers on the Chicano experience; Examine and question cultural stereotypes; Evaluate readings on the Chicano quest for meaning and identity.

The presenter will examine the historical and geographical development of the multicultural Latino community, investigating mostly its Mexican roots; Share the plight of the Latino immigrants in the last thirty years-Analyze the Chicano/a history, culture and socioeconomic status; Deepen the understanding of a body of literary works by Chicano/a writers; Generate new knowledge and perspectives on the topic of social oppression and human rights; and Develop an appreciation for all art forms generated by the Chicano communities in this country. Furthermore, the participants will learn how to create learning communities in which students and instructors learn together, and share and reflect on universal themes.

Keywords: multicultural education, Chicano stereotypes, biculturalism, Chicano experience
Introduction

For the first time ever, students at Webster University in St. Louis have taken a class that has presented to them the complex cultural, literary, political, economic and sociological experiences of Mexican Americans in the United States. I offered this three credit-hour course, twice a week, during Spring Semester 2012, that started in January. The topic was relevant, the focus was current, and the goal was to inform, sensitize, inspire and guide students to promote diversity and celebrate differences among people and cultures.

The idea for this class grew out of my doctoral dissertation on El tema del destierro in, Peregrinos de Aztlan, by Miguel Méndez. In one of my graduate classes at Saint Louis University, I started reading Chicano authors and became fascinated with the prose and poetry of those who exposed their living conditions in the borderlands. I almost memorized the last paragraph of Pilgrims in Aztlan. “Return beyond the crossroads. Break the silence of the centuries with the agony of your screams. You will see the fields in bloom where you planted your children and trees that have drunk the sap of the ages, petrified trees without songbirds and without owls, there where the voices of those who have succumbed dwell….Who has made you believe that you are lambs and beasts of burden?” (Méndez, p. 178).

From those readings, my own road was mapped out. I contacted Miguel Méndez and he graciously invited me to his home for an interview that lasted three days. Sharing this time with him, his wife, and children was a magical moment that made me relive many of the scenes of the book that had become the topic of my dissertation. After I graduated in 1983, I taught Spanish language classes in a career that spanned almost three decades. In 2011, after years of teaching and engaging in research in foreign language acquisition, I rekindled my passion for the literature and life experiences of those U.S. Latinos of Mexican ancestry. I knew that students at Webster University would benefit from the study of this culture and its implications for human rights. It would also confirm the University’s commitment to diversity, global education and international languages and cultures.

During the spring semester of 2011, I presented my proposal and applied for a grant at the Center for International Education at Webster University. In March, I received funds to purchase materials and books to continue my research and develop the structure and syllabus for the class. Although 28 years had passed since I had seen Miguel Méndez, I decided that I would definitely enrich the class and the students’ experience by interviewing him a second time. Although he had been retired for about 14 years, he was Professor Emeritus at the University of Arizona, in Tucson. I contacted the Department of Chicano and Latino Studies and was able to set up an interview in June 2011. My second journey took me to his new house in the mountains outside Tucson, flanked by the same saguaros that figure prominently in his books. For hours I interviewed him about his writings, his life and the Chicano experience, video recording the talk to share it with students later. Although 81 years old, and with some health issues, he still had the fire, the passion and the dedication to the advancement of Chicanos in all facets of life.

In August 2011, a trip to Long Beach, California allowed me to experience once more the richness of the Chicano culture, its music and its art. It was a special treat to be able to speak Spanish all the time, when shopping, in restaurants, fast food chains, on the bus and at the hotel. I also spent an afternoon with the Chair, José Moreno, of the Department of Chicano and Latino Studies at California State University, Long Beach, which boasts 17 faculty members. He provided valuable advice regarding the syllabus for the class, the required and recommended textbooks, and the focus for the course. Both Miguel Méndez, the aging author who is a pioneer in Chicano Literature, and José Mena, the university professor with a more current background, gave me a feel for what was important for students to know and to experience.

As the class was listed in the Department of International Languages and Cultures, it was cross-
listed with Multicultural Studies and International Studies. Seventeen students signed up, three of whom were Chicanos themselves. During 16 weeks, we explored the history and culture of Chicanos, the impact of César Chávez, the plight of immigrants, human rights and social oppression issues, as well as music and art forms and literature. I continued my research while my students, filled with enthusiasm, explored websites and brought current events issues to class. Basically, all students assumed ownership of the class and helped shape content and methods. In their bi-weekly journals, they shared what they had learned, what they hoped to achieve, and what needed to be explored further. The readings were challenging, considering that two of the main texts were written in stream of consciousness, and contained elements of magical realism. The registers belonged to different sociolinguistic communities that required multiple readings of some pages to achieve full understanding. At times, the language and colloquialisms of the factory workers were shocking, while in other situations Mendez’s elegant prose drew praise. In the author’s own words, “Our literature is art, testimony, a flag of rebellion, if you want. We provide a reflection of what is ours, including our popular speech: jargon, slang, whatever expression may be valid for showing our inner feelings,” (From Labor to Letters, p. 72).

Although Miguel Méndez was reared in the “University of Life,” he valued education immensely. Without any formal education, he was able to retire as a full professor at the University of Arizona, Tucson. His remarkable journey from construction work to academic life was chronicled in From Labor to Letters, his autobiographical novel. In Pilgrims of Aztlan, he depicted the struggles of undocumented workers crossing the Mexican-U.S. border and in 23 Millennial Stories he brought to life the oral tradition of his elders and the enchanted world of fables. These three books, as well as Pocho, by José Villareal, were required texts for the class. Borderlands, by Gloria Anzaldúa, was added as a recommended text based on a suggestion by José Mena. Finally, I supplied students with movie titles and websites to enhance their understanding of different topics.

Totally out of my comfort zone of teaching language classes for many years, I embarked on this new venture with the assistance of our library liaison, who provided resources, ideas and constant contributions to my never-ending list of books to be read, movies to be watched and websites to be checked. The conversations with students and my own family members even contributed new ideas on how to make the class highly participatory and engaging to the students.

**I set out to do the following**

- Examine the historical and geographical development of the multicultural Latino community, investigating mostly the Mexican-American groups
- Study the plight of Mexican immigrants since the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo
- Analyze the Chicano/a history, culture and socioeconomic status
- Provide an analysis of the colloquialisms and Chicano/Pocho patterns of speech
- Deepen the understanding of a body of literary works by Chicano/a writers
- Generate new knowledge and perspectives on the topic of social oppression and human rights of undocumented workers
- Develop an appreciation for all art forms, mainly paintings, murals and music, generated by the Chicano communities in the United States
- Compare and contrast different nonviolent movements trying to obtain equal rights (Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and César Chávez)
- Encourage writing as a form of self-expression and as a vehicle of organizing thoughts, generating new ideas and formulating hypotheses
- Give students the opportunity to engage in research related to ethnicity, class and gender as these concepts are applied to Chicanos
- Create a learning community in which students and instructor learn together, share and reflect on universal themes
Learning Objectives

- To expose students to multiple cultural perspectives based on original materials
- To communicate critically and sensitively with people from another culture through an understanding of one’s own culture
- To critically reflect on one’s own time, culture and place in the world
- To reflect on authentic materials such as songs, films and interviews with authors
- To express values and complex thoughts in writing
- To question cultural stereotypes
- To read critically and analytically

Learning Outcomes

- Discuss and analyze the syndrome of physical and spiritual “destierro” (alienation) that the Mexican and Mexican-American populations experience as depicted in Pilgrims in Aztlán
- Compare and contrast the search for meaning and identity in the Mexican and Mexican-American cultures
- Develop and design individual presentations on biculturalism, its sociolinguistic implications and man’s origin and destiny
- Evaluate the sociocultural impact of the Mexican immigration through the use of authentic materials
- Compose and write critical papers on the Chicano experience
- Examine and question cultural stereotypes
- Select and evaluate readings on the Chicano quest for meaning and identity

Classroom Assignments as Follows

- Journal entries based on all assigned weekly readings, as well as subsequent discussions, guest speakers and current events presentations. The intent was to have students include newly generated ideas, insights, reflections and questions.
- Current issues article presentations relevant to the class topics. This activity had to focus on issues raised by the article and the students’ analysis of the content and the author’s conclusions.
- A final essay with topics chosen by students included, among others, Chicano culture, education, language, Arizona laws, predatory lending, racism and the zoot suit riots of 1943, equality, cultural identity, Latino gangs, acculturation and identity, the desperate search of the “American Dream,” the cosmic race, GMO, the cost of cheap food and Chicano/Mexican identity.

Classroom Activities Were as Follows

- Analysis of the poem “Yo soy Joaquín” and the characters in Pilgrims in Aztlán
- Comparison of chapters in Pilgrims in Aztlán to Borderlands, by Gloria Anzaldúa
- Linguistic analysis of some Chicano patterns of speech included in From Labor to Letters
- Multiple discussions on the cycle of poverty, the cosmic race, the labyrinth of solitude, civil rights road trip, refugee assistance, legal issues facing Mexican Americans, music and songs, discrimination, conflicts, injustices and the philosophy of non-violence
- Current events presentations, debates, mock trials, advocacy advertisements, and debunking myths
- Creation of song lyrics or a newspaper column to illustrate a topic discussed
- Use of learning stations to appreciate Chicano history as expressed in art manifestations
- Use of Venn diagrams and idea mapping and webs to organize thoughts and compare and contrast different topics
- The ultimate purpose of all activities was to keep students engaged and eager to learn.

Lessons Learned

As we held an end-of-the -semester celebration, students shared their opinions regarding possible improvements to the class. They indicated that next time the class is taught, I should introduce Chicanos
on TV and in movies, their contributions, innovations and successes, more pop culture, including food, and perhaps more bilingual materials to read.

From my own perspective, I decided to replace one of the required textbooks, From Labor to Letters, with another one, written by a Chicana author in order to compare topics, focus and perceptions with male writers. Furthermore, in the process of creating and teaching the class, I became interested in a new field, that of Latina writers in the United States. Consequently, I presented another proposal to the Center for International Education at Webster University requesting assistance with the purchase of materials for my research. Fortunately, the center awarded me another grant and I am now in the process of developing the new class to be taught in the fall semester of 2012.

The road has been bumpy and with many hurdles along the way. The final result has been very rewarding for both students and instructor. It has definitely opened new doors to research and it has enriched the lives of all of those who participated in so many ways in the class. This is definitely the value of a college education, to open and enlighten young minds, to promote civic awareness and community involvement, and to instill the joy of lifelong learning.

In the words of Dr. David Carl Wilson, Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at Webster University, “The humanities help humans to succeed both individually and collectively… Individually, our spirits are elevated by the work of those who are bolder, wiser or more creative than we had ever imagined. Our horizons are widened by ideas, images or sounds that shock us into seeing possibilities that we had never imagined… Collectively, the humanities strengthen global society by promoting affinities with those who might otherwise repel us as strange or barbarous,” (Commentary, St. Louis Beacon, May 1, 2012).

This is basically what I attempted to achieve in my new class. As I wrote in my own doctoral dissertation, our main text for the class, Pilgrims in Aztlan, by Miguel Méndez, is an intricate tapestry of the Chicano life in the Southwest of the United States and in the Mexican border towns, projected into a profound look at the world and man’s origin and destiny. The existential drama that represents the cultural contradiction of the Chicano is exemplified in the treatment of the sociolinguistics of the Chicano language and the phenomenology of destierro of those who live alienated in their own country, Mexico. In their pilgrimage to Aztlan, the Promised Land in the Southwest of the United States, they are forced into the same destierro, now both physical and spiritual. This constant interface reflects the bicultural condition of the Chicano and his future as the “new man” or the “new race.”

The concept of destierro is depicted by the masses or migrants or peregrinos (pilgrims). The sociocultural impact of the Mexican migration to the United States and its psychological overtones constitute the core of this inverted pilgrimage of the Mexican American, from Aztec prince to undocumented worker. The subsequent syndrome of alienation as seen in the Mexican, American and Chicano societies is the existential dilemma to be solved as students continue exploring this and other themes, my hope is that we can continue the conversations started in class, as well as the community of learning that we have established.

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