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## ABSTRACT

In 1996, California's Rancho Santiago College (RSC) participated in the American Association of Community Colleges' Exploring America's Communities project, which works to strengthen the teaching and learning of American history, literature, and culture at U.S. community colleges. To enhance instruction about American pluralism and identity, RSC's team developed a project to give students the opportunity to explore these issues in the local community. The project was also intended to provide students with a chance to learn experientially and cooperatively by visiting designated sites in the vicinity in teams and reporting their findings to their classes. The "City as Text" course was originally introduced to students in a U.S. History Honors course, and was subsequently applied in fall 1996 in two different classroom situations: English composition and Mexican American history. Students compared social and cultural phenomena at the classroom, campus, and city levels. Students in all courses shared how exciting it was to learn a subject matter under different and exciting circumstances. The project received full support from the college chancellor and the instructors. As the project developed, it became apparent that a certain level of consciousness-raising needed to be done. The project has helped to enhance both instructional approaches and inter-cultural relations on campus. (HAA)

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# American Pluralism in Microcosm: The City of Santa Ana as Text Exploring America's Communities Progress Report

Rancho Santiago Community College

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COLLEGE DISTRICT

## American Pluralism in Microcosm:

### The City of Santa Ana as Text

John Nixon, Tom Osborne, and Angelina F. Veyna  
Rancho Santiago College, Santa Ana, California

#### **Rancho Santiago College**

Rancho Santiago College (RSC) is located in the very culturally diverse community of Santa Ana, California. In fact, Santa Ana has one of the largest Latino populations in the state (about 75% of Santa Ana is Latino, mainly Mexican), and the nearby communities of Garden Grove and Westminster are home to a large Asian population, mainly Southeast Asian. Since 1915 when initially opened as an extension of Santa Ana High School, Rancho Santiago College has evolved into a comprehensive community college district serving a population of more than 400,000 residents of central Orange County. The multi-campus structure of the college provides an opportunity for approximately 2,000 classes to be offered each semester supporting Associate Degrees and Certificate programs.

As of Fall 1996 Rancho Santiago College now enrolls approximately 25,000 students in college credit programs and about 16,000 in non-credit education classes. The population attending Rancho Santiago's credit classes can be categorized as follows: 37% Euroamerican students, 34% Latino students, 18% Asian students, and 11% other ethnicities, as well as foreign students. The mission of Rancho Santiago College is to be a leader and partner in meeting the academic, cultural, and workforce development needs of a diverse community. RSC prepares students for transfer to baccalaureate-granting institutions, prepares students for employment and careers, and prepares students with competency in basic skills so they can pursue higher goals. RSC has demonstrated a strong commitment to diversity and in fact, stated among RSC's institutional goals, is a commitment towards providing a

positive learning environment that "welcomes, understands and embraces the cultural diversity of the [students'] community and the world." Multicultural courses in the social sciences, the humanities, and the arts have long been a tradition of Rancho Santiago College's curriculum.

### **Action Plan**

To enhance teaching and learning about American pluralism and identity at our college, Rancho Santiago College's team developed a project entitled **American Pluralism in Microcosm: The City of Santa Ana as Text**. The major purpose of this project was to give students the opportunity to explore contemporary American pluralism and identity in the local setting of Santa Ana, the community immediately surrounding Rancho Santiago College. This project was viewed as an initial step for students to become introduced to our multicultural community in order to explore the concept of "common ground." By encountering and reflecting on these social phenomena in an urban microcosm of the country at large, it was expected that students would enhance their understanding of pluralism and identity at the national level. A second purpose was to provide students with a chance to learn experientially and cooperatively by visiting designated sites in Santa Ana in teams and reporting their findings to their classes.

The Rancho Santiago College Team consisted of John Nixon, Dean of Instruction and in this case, instructor of English Composition; and Tom Osborne and Angelina F. Veyna of RSC's History Department. Prof. Osborne first introduced the project last Spring Semester 1996 when he assigned his students in his U.S. History Honors Course to go out and explore Santa Ana. The students were instructed to especially address three questions:

- 1) What population/s are visible in Santa Ana?
- 2) How do they make use of physical space in Santa Ana? and
- 3) What kinds of cultural production are reflected in Santa Ana?

Students were sent out in teams and were to return and report their findings to their classmates. Prof. Osborne's application of the "City as Text" project was limited to a single classroom with less than 20 students. Students returned with creative projects such as thematic maps of Santa Ana, photographic

collages encompassing a specific theme such as religion or the arts, and videotapes showcasing Santa Ana's history and aspects of multiculturalism. After the presentation of the projects, classroom discussion centered on addressing the questions of what it mean to be an American, what divides us, and what commonalities bind us.

The objective this Fall Semester 1996 was to take the "City as Text" project and adapt it to two different classroom situations. The project was implemented in one English composition course instructed by John Nixon at RSC's Orange Campus, and across four Mexican American History classes taught by Angelina Veyna at the Santa Ana campus. In Prof. Veyna's Mexican American History classes, students were instructed to go out into Santa Ana and report back what they observed in regards to the use of space in the city, the people of Santa Ana, and the cultural diversity reflected throughout the city. Prof. Veyna first took her students through a series of observational exercises prior to actually sending them out into the community.

Students were instructed to first observe their classrooms and describe (in an individually written essay) how students situated themselves physically and culturally, and describe how the classroom reflected the culture or cultures represented by the students. Secondly, students were instructed to walk the Santa Ana campus and describe (in a another essay) how space was used by the students, describe the people they saw, and to describe how different cultures were reflected or interacted with each other. Having realized in both exercises that people tended to segregate themselves culturally, they were assigned into teams by Prof. Veyna and told to suggest ideas for improving multicultural relations. Students came up with ideas such as multicultural fairs, the development of new courses addressing the various cultures present on campus, the development of student cultural retreats off campus, and the development of multicultural clubs.

The fourth step in Prof. Veyna's classes were the actual observations of Santa Ana. Whereas in the third exercise students were assigned into teams by the instructor, for the actual city observation, students were allowed to divide themselves as they wished and felt comfortable. Students in all four Mexican American History classes (a total of about 160 students) were sent out to explore Santa Ana. Several weeks later, students returned to their classrooms ready to share videos in which they interviewed

different community members and in which they showcased different geographic sectors of Santa Ana. Other videos focussed on a single theme such as "religions in Santa Ana" and shared excerpts of different religious services, while other students documented their own "discovery" of another culture's community. Other students developed collages presented on poster boards displaying thematic maps of Santa Ana, comparing photographs of Santa Ana's historic past with the present, or comparing and contrasting different cultural restaurants in the city. Yet other students delivered formal presentations, using slides, of how identity was reflected throughout the community. One positive outcome of the City as Text project was that students who normally would be too shy to deliver an oral presentation before class, were able to find themselves sufficiently comfortable in this classroom context to actually do the talking or to at least stand with team members before the classroom.

The third participant in the project, John Nixon, implemented the "City as Text" curriculum in a section of Freshman Composition during the Fall '96 semester. Working with twenty-eight students, Prof. Nixon modified slightly the original curriculum to allow for individuals and groups to take the assignment and to allow individuals and groups to investigate any local city and not just Santa Ana. The students enthusiastically conducted their investigations and reported orally and in writing that they experienced people, places, and events that they had never encountered before. The majority of the students in this class were European Americans who had little or no experience with Latino or Asian cultures, which predominate in Santa Ana. Students conveyed how much they appreciated the opportunity to explore areas and arenas they had never sought on their own.

All three team leaders gathered their students' impressions of this project. Students in all courses shared how exciting it was to learn a subject matter under different and exciting circumstances. Other students conveyed that they appreciated the opportunity to explore and learn about other cultures and appreciated the opportunity to compare and contrast their own culture with that of others. Some students mentioned that it was great to work in teams in order to meet new people and develop new friendships, and as a result of this project, tended to feel less inhibited and more comfortable greeting students from other cultures in their classrooms and on campus. Unfortunately, our local media often focusses on the negative aspects of Santa Ana, thus several students mentioned their discovery of a "different" Santa Ana

from that reported by the media, they discovered that their city reflected many positive attributes. Some students noted that as a result of exploring "their" city, that they now felt a responsibility towards contributing to their community. Other students noted that the City as Text project has propelled them to undertake actions they have never engaged in, e.g., increased visits to their community libraries and developing research about their city's history. Teachers on campus also commented to team members that they had heard from students about their exciting learning experience. Students who participated in the City as Text Project strongly suggested that it continue to be incorporated into future classes; as one student put it: "This Santa Ana project was a success. It was a great learning experience and also amusing. I believe this project is a vital tool for learning and getting students involved in learning about the community that surrounds our campus."

As we developed the project on campus, the Rancho Santiago College Team received the full support of the college chancellor. In fact, she was present in Prof. Osborne's Honors History course when his students presented their projects last Spring Semester '96 as well as in Prof. Veyna's Mexican American history classes this Fall Semester. It should also be noted that the positive collaboration of RSC team members and their personal commitment to student success helped to make this project a rewarding experience.

### **The Future for the "City as Text" Project**

All three team instructors definitely want to continue incorporating the project into their classroom. Also, students will probably be encouraged to explore not only Santa Ana but also other communities from which our students derive. There are no reservations with regards to the success of the program. An overwhelming 95% of the students involved suggested that the project be continued in classes this next semester. Future plans include both short term and long term goals. Writing a comprehensive report about the project is one immediate goal and sharing it with colleagues from other campuses is another. Prof. Osborne, Prof. Veyna and several students who participated in the City as Text project will be making a presentation in May 1977 in San Diego at the Annual Conference of the Western Regional Honors Council whose conference theme is very apropos of this project: "Pacific Destiny:

Beyond Borders, Boundaries, Limits." Prof. Osborne and Prof. Veyna are also planning to share the City as Text project with RSC colleagues through the Professional Development Program next August. The RSC team also plans to explore new avenues of funding to develop projects that can build on the City as Text project, for example, a program whereby students conduct oral histories of community members in order to develop an oral history archive, perhaps on our campus. Of course, the City as Text project will continue to be adapted into our team's future courses.

### **Exploring America's Communities: In Quest of Common Ground**

As we explored the concept of what it means to be an American, it became apparent that a certain level of consciousness-raising needed to be done. Our students, as many of us, are so overwhelmed by life's daily activities that we often don't take the time to meditate and reflect on our country and on what it means to be an American. For this reason, the City as Text project as applied in all three courses was meant to raise students' consciousness regarding their social and cultural relationships to their college peers and their community. The attempt was made to develop students' observational skills so that they in turn would assess how and where they fit into their community and into American society at large.

To many of the City as Text students, an overwhelming portion of whom are themselves immigrants or came from immigrant families, the feeling was that by knowing one's cultural background, it serves as a foundation for learning about other cultures. Once students realized how divided they situated themselves in the classroom and on campus, they then became more excited about trying to develop ideas to improve those multicultural relations. Unfortunately, RSC team members cannot report that students immediately and totally became integrated in the classrooms or on their campus, but awareness about their commonalities was heightened and the creation of a "safe" environment in which to cross cultural boundaries was initiated.

The cities served by Rancho Santiago college serve as a "common ground" for immigrants (as is the case in our classrooms and campus.) These cities serve as a magnet for Latino immigrants, for Asian immigrants, and for immigrants of many other countries. Thus the common experience of leaving a homeland, experiencing the actual migration process--sometimes under enormous and tumultuous

circumstances, and having to adapt to a dominant culture is a common experience shared by many of Orange County's residents and students, as well as an enormous portion of our American society.

"Common ground" is what many of Santa Ana's residents and Rancho Santiago College students are striving for as they try to learn English, try to educate themselves, and attempt to acquire the "American Dream" As the students themselves stated in some of their papers: "What we have in common is that we all want to live in America and we all want to succeed in America." A few years back, Prof. Osborne, one of our RSC team members, suggested that Rancho Santiago College enhance its identity by adopting a new motto: RSC: A Diverse Learning Community. This City as Text project has certainly allowed us to give credence to this motto. This project has also undoubtedly helped us to enhance and make more exciting our teaching approaches. Most of all, this project has allowed us to work towards improving multicultural relations on our campus as we continue to search for that "Common Ground."



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