



Becoming a Border Pedagogy Educator:



Border Paradox

Reflecting on my experiences as an educator over the past four years, I realize that Border Pedagogy has profoundly shaped my vision for education, significantly changed my instructional practice, and effectively focused my efforts for social justice and equity in multicultural schools. During my first year as a professor of education, I joined Border Pedagogy's group of visionary educators from schools on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border to cross the physical and conceptual boundaries that structure the language, policy, and practice of education in the region.

According to Reyes (2005), "We define border pedagogy as a set of multifaceted, complex, and interactive factors; educational policies; curriculum; instructional practices; and a knowledge base that educators need to consider to increase the academic achievement of diverse students in the border region" (p. 149)

Zee Cline, the Director of the Center for the Study of Border Pedagogy at

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California State University, San Marcos, explained that she and Juan Necochea had started Border Pedagogy with the conviction that "something powerful could happen by bringing teachers from both sides of the border together to sit down and talk to each other" (Cline, Border Pedagogy Conference, October 3, 2005). The bi-national, bicultural, and bilingual round table conversations at the heart of Border Pedagogy events have proven extremely powerful, and in this article I describe how they have impacted me as an educator and a professor.

My experiences with Border Pedagogy ushered me into the central paradox of the U.S./Mexican border—that the same barrier dividing the people who live on each side of it also creates a unique set of life experiences that they share in common. Intuitively, a focus on the border would seemingly highlight all that divides the habitants living on either side. But in a counterintuitive paradox, the border itself becomes a unifying factor illuminating surprising similarities among borderlands inhabitants living on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border.

Taking advantage of this paradox, Cline and Necochea (2002) created Border Pedagogy to explore education as

situated within the unique U.S./Mexico border region. In a qualitative study of the experiences of teachers from both sides of the border, Reyes and Garza (2005) found that teachers on both sides of the border had "mutual concerns" because they understood that they live and teach in a unique region in which educators need "a curriculum relevant to the unique needs of those students who inhabit or traverse that region" (159).

"Something New"

When I entered the professorship as a bilingual teacher in a post 9-11 world, anti-immigration sentiments like the border itself were growing to an all time high—speaking Spanish, looking "illegal," and crossing the border were all highly suspect. I needed a way through the political rhetoric that would tap the heart of my students. I needed a way to move past my own anger with an educational system dedicated to preserving mono-cultural, mono-lingual practice and to institutionalizing failure through high stakes testing.

If I was going to be a professor preparing educators to work with the rich diversity in local school communities, I refused to be one that inculcated my students in the plot line of the current educational

Rooting Practice in Paradox

Elizabeth Garza



rhetoric replete with damaging stereotypes of students in multicultural schools, with their negative views of Mexicans, Latino cultures, and the Spanish language. I needed a new story, one that would “interrupt the past ways of thinking about the border region” (Jeffries, 2002, p. 72) and Border Pedagogy as a field of study was authoring one.

New understandings of education in the border region were emerging and developing as educators from both sides of the San Diego/Tijuana border crossed the border to talk together in conferences, institutes, and seminars. One veteran educator from Mexico articulated the power of this experience.

I said to myself, here I am learning so much and after all these years in education. This is new. This is something completely new... When you talk and share with teachers from the other side of the border, teachers just like us, it causes this desire to fulfill your promise as a teacher to help our students grow, to achieve their dreams and realize their full potentials. (Maria)

By participating in Border Pedagogy encounters, I realized that we were creating something new, ideas about education policy and practice that were forged out of a deeper understanding of bicultural and

bi-national experience. I came to the conclusion that becoming a Border Pedagogy professor carried the potential to move past the obstacles to preparing effective multicultural teachers and to improve education for culturally and linguistically diverse students in the border region schools. Border Pedagogy was developed in response to the need for better “school systems and structures, that are more equitable and just, that understand the extreme complexity of the borderland experience and implement instructional practices that are more teacher driven and contextually based” (Cline & Necochea, 2002, p. 46).

When I joined the education faculty, the many efforts to breathe life into commitments to social justice and equity, impressed me. At the same time, I also noticed that our classes were dominated by White students with limited cross-cultural knowledge and that as a result, the multicultural emphasis of our education courses was typically limited to teaching White students about diversity, a situation in which many other teacher education programs find themselves (Sleeter, 2001).

The students of color in our education programs, though fewer in number, brought a richer multicultural knowledge base that could be built upon to prepare

them as excellent, culturally responsive educators. With few exceptions, however, our education courses did not actively engage the perspectives of students of color; for example, the experiential, cultural, and linguistic knowledge base of Latino students which is so pertinent to education in the borderlands was rarely tapped outside of BCLAD courses.

I felt that Border Pedagogy could serve as a transformative experience that could benefit both students of color and White students in my education courses. I recognized its potential to build on the multicultural knowledge base of students of color, in particular Latino students, and also to facilitate White students’ personal connections to the issues of social justice, equity and diversity.

Theoretical Foundation

In classrooms close to the San Diego/Tijuana border, the proximity to the border shapes the context of teaching and learning. Regardless the extent to which inhabitants of the region have personal experience with the actual physical border, its presence powerfully influences the details of everyday life. A wide variety of perceptions about the border, its purpose, and the role it should have in the lives of

those that inhabit the borderlands is part of the complexity of life in the region.

Living and learning in the borderlands is a unique experience in which the mutual influence of the Mexican and U.S. cultures has created a regional bi-national culture that combines aspects of both ways of life. The affects of globalization are deeply felt in the San Diego/Tijuana border region that is “arguably the most globalized spot in the world today” (Suárez-Orozco, 2001, p. 348). The dynamic “process of change” within a globalized economy brings nations into essentially different relationships with each other economically, socially, and culturally (Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Educators in schools close to the border find themselves interpreting key roles in the unfolding drama of globalization.

Despite the plethora of research showing that sound pedagogical practice for diverse students is based on deep and responsive understanding of the students’ culture, language, and lived experiences (Nieto, 2004), the culture of schooling in the border region is oriented to resist the presence and influence of Mexican culture and the Spanish language. Educational policy, language, and practice continue to institutionalize structures that resist the necessary adaptations of instructional design and that fail to train teachers in the essential dispositions for working with bi-cultural and transnational students (Cline & Necochea, 2006).

A critical theory of education emphasizes that teachers need to be able to understand and analyze the links between the social and political realities of the border region and the day-to-day classroom practice if they are going to sufficiently equip their students with the essential skills and strategies they need to negotiate their multiple identities and the complexities of life in the region (Beyer, 2001, 154).

The resistance to the complex and vibrant reality of the multicultural, bilingual, and bi-national border region is not only short sighted, but it also forfeits the success of the students it purports to serve, failing to prepare them with the critical skills needed in today’s competitive global economy: “communication, higher-order symbolic and technical competencies, and habits of work and interpersonal sensibilities” (Suárez-Orozco, 2001, p. 357).

In effect, the current policy and practices erect social and conceptual “borders” within the educational setting intent on replicating the US/Mexico divide and on maintaining current relations of power. Crossing those borders, as Giroux (1992) suggests, is essential to challenging and

changing them and the oppressive forces that maintain them.

By creating a means by which to cross borders, both physical and conceptual, Border Pedagogy helps participating teachers, including student teachers, “to link broader political, ideological, and social issues with the concrete realities of schools. Teachers who embody these orientations will intervene in the lives of their students so as to help construct with them futures that are personally rewarding, socially responsible, and morally compelling” (Beyer, 2001, p. 156).

Unveiling Borders

I started incorporating Border Pedagogy into my courses simply by sharing anecdotes from my own experiences with Border Pedagogy and inviting students to attend. I noticed that doing so helped me to more explicitly contextualize the topics of curriculum and instruction that I was teaching within the larger issues of life and learning in the borderlands. The topic of the border is frequently “the elephant in the room” in educational conversations.

My explicit statements about being prepared to teach *in the border region* and to work with *transnational children and families* who come and go across the border to schools in both the U.S. and Mexico made the U.S./Mexican border visible in my courses. Unveiling the physical border brought to light its influence in our lives, education policy and practice.

This unveiling of the border in my courses made multicultural education topics more approachable for many of my students. The Border Pedagogy perspective invited both students of color and White students to reference their own day-to-day lived experience in the borderlands. Referring to their own experiential base as borderland inhabitants repositioned my students in relation to each other as well as to the curriculum in at least two ways.

First, a spontaneous regrouping took place among the students based on a sense of a shared identity and experience as borderland inhabitants. They were positioned to explore educational topics from that common ground. For example, when discussing the issues of cultural and linguistic diversity in education students drew on their experience as inhabitants of the border region to build deeper understanding. They found many common threads of experience, all of which took on new importance for the students because they saw them as part of being prepared to teach *in the border region*. Two White, non-bilingual students reflected on their borderland identity and knowledge base,

revealing their growing awareness of how it could significantly inform their teaching.

We feel more confident and comfortable being placed into schools within the borderlands because it is not an unfamiliar environment to us. Because I live in the borderlands I am more conscious of the needs of not only Spanish speaking students but of all students that speak different languages and come from different cultures. (Tracy & Sarah)

My students started to understand that their life experience in the border region was a valuable resource that would serve them as an advantage teaching in local schools.

Second, referring to their own experiential base as borderland inhabitants turned the multicultural knowledge bases of students of color into valuable assets within the classroom community. For many students of color the reaffirmation of the value of their knowledge base within the classroom motivated them to more actively draw from, build on and apply their multicultural knowledge base to their development as educators.

For example, many Latino students and bilingual students came to realize that they were better prepared for teaching *in the borderlands* by virtue of their deeper experiential knowledge of Latino cultures and/or the Spanish language.

Crossing Borders

During my first year as a professor, a handful of my students attended a Border Pedagogy event and were so deeply moved by their experiences that I decided to provide students in all my courses options to attend Border Pedagogy events and write reflections on the experience for a few points of class credit.

My students’ attendance of Border Pedagogy events resulted in more concrete, experiential understandings of multicultural education and motivated them to challenge unjust and inequitable structures in education. The experiential dimension of Border Pedagogy involved students in cross-cultural and bi-national interactions that frequently exposed their own conceptual borders in the form of perceptions and assumptions.

Conversations with educators from the Mexican side of the border challenged all my students in new ways. They were deeply interested and even shaken at times when their own long held assumptions about Mexican culture, Mexican education, and Spanish were challenged by actually talking with teachers from Mexico. Their experiences in Border Pedagogy helped

many of my students to be more willing to explore and revise their own thinking about multicultural education issues.

One White, non-bilingual student reflected on her new understandings of culture after attending a Border Pedagogy event:

The whole event opened my eyes about diversity. I learned that here is a culture from another country that can be celebrated, shared. And it is important for me to take into account all that I am learning from them [the Mexican educators] when I am teaching. (Jennifer)

The bilingual, bicultural and bi-national nature of Border Pedagogy events offered White students an optimal multicultural learning situation “in which they had to grapple with being in the minority, did not necessarily know how to act, and were temporarily unable to retreat to the comfort of a culturally familiar setting” (Sleeter, 2001, 97). Many White students viewed Border Pedagogy events as cross-cultural immersion experiences in which they made personal connections with issues of diversity and “learned more in a single day than I have in all my years of college” (Sue).

For many students of color, Latino students in particular, the Border Pedagogy events valued, extended, and applied their knowledge base. It gave them opportunities to explore multiple perspectives. “I had the privilege of speaking with so many different teachers from Mexico... I heard such a great variety of ideas, themes, concepts and inspirational stories” (Yessica).

Many students of color connected to the experiences on a deeper emotional level that facilitated deeper learning. “I learned a lot not only from what the Mexican educators had to say in our round table discussions, but also from my overall experience both mental and emotional” (Rita). One Latina, bilingual student reflecting on her conversations during a Border Pedagogy conference commented,

The whole experience has made me value the education system more than ever and get angry because many students don't take advantage of it. Many of our problems also happen in schools on the Mexican side. We all struggle with being able to meet every student's needs. (Rosemary)

Similarly, another Latina, bilingual student commented on what she gained from a Border Pedagogy seminar:

I am happy to have participated in this seminar because it has enlarged my perspective. It was extremely interesting to speak with the other [Mexican] teachers and be able to see things from their perspective. (Yessica)

Bilingual Communication

Border Pedagogy participants from both sides of the border needed to cross language borders in order to fully participate in Border Pedagogy conversations. Participants in round table discussions had varying degrees of bilingualism. Some were monolingual speakers of either Spanish or English. Others had some knowledge of the other language and still others were fully bilingual.

Interestingly, the need to communicate across language differences raised the status of bilinguals who were sought out because of their ability to facilitate communication and understanding during round table discussions. It was very common to hear participants say that they now realized the value of being bilingual and that they wanted to start or continue learning the other language.

One White, bilingual student attended several events, commenting that after several years of studying Spanish, Border Pedagogy encounters had given her a renewed sense of the importance of the language to her career as a teacher.

I attempted to cross the language ‘border’ and the experience was very meaningful to me. After attending this conference my interest and motivation to continue with my Spanish studies and obtain a BCLAD was revived. I have always been interested in languages because they allow you to interact with people, discovering worlds and ideas that you would otherwise not have access to.

Border Pedagogy offered us a refreshing, communicative approach to understanding linguistic diversity. The linguistic relations of power that keep English dominant and Spanish subordinate in U.S. schools in the border region was rendered powerless as we used both languages for communicative ends, to arrive at understanding, to ask questions, and learn from each other. Many non-bilingual students had eye opening experiences during Border Pedagogy events, in which crossing the “border of language” was a natural part of negotiating meaning.

My students developed a deeper confidence that communicating across language barriers with children and families in their own classrooms was possible. They also gained important insights into the role of bilingualism and the process of learning language. Most importantly, many non-bilingual students developed empathy for English Language Learners (ELL). Crossing the language border at Border Pedagogy encounters connected them personally to the experience ELL children face daily. A Latina, non-bilingual student, Rita, detailed

the nuances of her developing understanding in her insightful comments:

Although I am Mexican-American, I do not speak Spanish. I know a word here or there but I could not carry on a conversation nor can I understand the language very well. So when I was in the group I was the only one who did not understand Spanish. Being in this situation really helped me see what newcomers feel like in English-only American classrooms. I really tried to understand. I studied the gestures and I listened for tone of voice. It was a relief every time the woman next to me summarized and translated the conversation. It is also a reminder that teachers cannot look at a student and assume that s/he speaks the language based on how that child looks.

Students' Border Pedagogy experiences using Spanish and English to negotiate meaning was a topic that students wanted to return to again and again in the classroom setting. I noticed that the conversational encounters the students had during Border Pedagogy naturally spilled over into the courses I was teaching. After attending a Border Pedagogy session, they were eager to debrief their experiences, to share how they felt during the activities, to see if others had similar experiences and feelings.

Meaningful Conversation

Because Border Pedagogy conversations kept spilling over into class time, I realized I was going to have to change how I structured my courses so as to systematically include these conversations. It was logical to think that preparing teachers to respond differently, in transformative ways, to the situations they would face in borderlands schools would require me to teach differently. Margaret Wheatley, an expert in leadership and systems thinking, explained the different kind of learning that can occur through conversations:

We attend a [course] for our own purposes, for ‘what I can get out of this.’ Conversation is different. Although we each benefit individually from good conversation, we also discover that we were never as separate as we thought. Good conversation connects us at a deeper level. As we share our different human experiences, we rediscover a sense of unity. And as an added joy, we also discover our collective wisdom. (2002, p. 28)

Bringing together citizens of two nations, individuals of different cultures and languages, our dialogue adopted a culture of collegiality, where stories are shared, “ideas are challenged, background assumptions are uncovered, and new ways of thinking and doing are identified and embraced” (Jeffries, 2002, 73). This kind of

conversation took participants to a “deeper level” where we discovered a “sense of unity” and the “collective wisdom” about how to educate the children in our care.

Border Pedagogy conversations exposed our connectedness as educators in the borderlands and how we could inform and strengthen each other’s educational practice. The round table discussions also repositioned U.S. teachers, and student teachers, in relation to Mexican influences on local U.S. schools. Face to face with teachers from Mexico who had the same passion for education, my students began to see that U.S. educators not only had something to give Mexican educators but also a great deal to learn from them.

One student wrote:

I hope we can continue the dialogue [with teachers from Mexico] so we can exchange more ideas on how to educate all our students, since schools near the border will always have students from both sides of the border who need to learn and to be educated. (Viviani)

I did want to help my students explore multiple perspectives, in an experiential way, through good conversation. But to be honest, I still underestimated the power of conversations and frequently rejected them in favor of more expedient approaches such as direct lecture and activity based lessons. I found it difficult to let go of my own felt need to unearth, reveal, and explain the essential points for my students. Yet, what I witnessed at Border Pedagogy events challenged my assumptions.

I will never forget the Border Pedagogy seminar which convinced me to let go of “controlling the conversation” in favor of “facilitating the conversation.” At this event, table groups with educators from both sides of the border were engaged in discussing the extremely complex and volatile issues of immigration in the region. They had to analyze, discuss the topic using multiple materials and, ultimately, present a synthesis of their ideas as a group.

As each group presented I have to admit my amazement when I realized that together the groups had made every single major point that I would have covered in a lecture on the topic. In addition, I saw that their syntheses were nuanced and complex, incorporating multiple perspectives and drawing powerful insights that were meaningful for all. Finally, I realized that all these major points and deep insights had been generated by *the participants themselves*. I recognized the “collective wisdom” that Wheatley talked about and I saw later in my students’ reflections how these insights were written on their hearts and minds.

For those children that do have passports, and therefore can cross the border freely, they are exposed to everything that we have here in the U.S. and they want to grow up and be able to come here. The Mexican teacher I was speaking with said, ‘We are so worried about ‘having’ that we have forgotten to ‘become.’ I understand what she was saying. I, too, believe that we need to educate our students to become enlightened adults who will move both countries forward. (Viviani)

Incorporating Border Pedagogy conversations into my courses opened the door of possibility. My students frequently made spontaneous connections and applications between their Border Pedagogy experiences and their instructional practice. “I have come to a greater awareness of my students’ needs and that I must use more creative approaches to teach these learners in order to meet their specific needs” (Sarah). These insightful connections emerged naturally within the context of their conversations.

I realized that when they are given the opportunity to share deeply and to listen to each other, students in education programs can challenge social injustice and make instructional decisions that reflect a commitment to equity:

The biggest message was that I need to make information comprehensible for my students, putting myself in their shoes, trying to create experiences that I would find enjoyable... Teamwork, understanding, patience and creativity needs to be a part of the daily learning experience. (Janet)

Conclusion

At recent Border Pedagogy events, I took note that many teachers were present who had formerly been students in my courses. Faced with the reality of the daily multicultural classroom, they continue to return again and again to participate in Border Pedagogy encounters. I asked a few of them to explain why they kept returning. One common theme in their answers was their sense that they had become part of a community of educators working together to ask better questions about the issues of education in the border region and to support each other in developing better, more “enlightened” schooling practices.

Many of them told me that they would leave a Border Pedagogy event with new instructional ideas, approaches, and understandings that they would apply in their own classrooms the very next day. One respected Latino bilingual educator explained the phenomenon, referring to a line in a song by Machado that has become one of the major theme songs for Border

Pedagogy: caminante no hay camino, se hace camino al andar [walker there is no path, the path is made as you walk].

The strategies that we discover and develop together create a vibrant energy within each of us, an excitement to go back and try these in our classrooms. Through understanding that there are no recipes or formulas, no checklists or advice that describe the one best way to educate all children, Border Pedagogy participants are discovering new ways of relating and engaging students, *caminos* that allow students to become critical thinkers and creative problems solvers. (Estrada, 2006, p. 36)

The paradoxical sense of unity that a focus on the border creates encouraged us to challenge and seek to change the unjust barriers to quality education for Latino students in border region schools. We started to believe that together, crossing borders, we could make a difference. Rosemary articulated this point in her reflection on a Border Pedagogy conference:

I went away from the conference inspired, like we can make a difference, but also with a deeper understanding of many of the problems we face as educators along the border. I am anxious to return [to Border Pedagogy] again. (Rosemary)

I realized that students needed the kind of opportunities that Border Pedagogy provided to learn and practice border crossing. A few of the hallmark effects of Border Pedagogy border crossing experiences for my students were student-generated transformative insights, salient connections to educational practice, and spontaneous visioning for further action.

I concluded that border crossing experiences needed to play a larger part in my courses. In my literacy courses, I invited students to attend a bilingual Family Literacy event. One White, non-bilingual student explained how this border crossing experience had begun changing her perspective. First, she described her majority status experiences with education and then, how the bilingual Family Literacy event provided her a new way of looking at minority language and culture, and finally, how she had begun to rethink the parameters of her own relationship to language(s).

As a parent who has participated in school family events, I have always felt a little uncomfortable when families of ‘other’ cultures and languages struggled to participate in the English only activities at these events. It was so refreshing to see the Hispanic parents at this bilingual literacy event truly embrace the literacy activities and share family stories with so much grace, humor and pride. My desire to become bilingual grows with every rich

new experience that illustrates the power of language. (Leslie)

By being involved in the bilingual Family Literacy event she acknowledged a viable alternative to her majority status understandings of education. By expressing her desire to become bilingual, she pointed out the connection she made to her newly revised expectations of herself as a teacher. It is these changes in her own expectations of herself as a teacher that position her for more culturally responsive teaching in the future.

For other students who have more experience with border crossing, I concluded that I myself prompts me to join with them in action. One student who had attended a number of Border Pedagogy events recently wrote a reflection stating that he was ready to take further steps of action. He felt empowered with a deep understanding of himself as a border crosser, a collaborative agent of change, and he had a compelling desire to take action:

Now it is time for us to move forward and really start taking steps to address the learning challenges that our students face...Perhaps it is time to consider smaller satellite seminars where educators from both sides of the border could forge working relationships to target the unique challenges our students face and, hopefully, help us to forge ahead in transform the educational experience for our students. (Matt)

In drawing generalizations about my journey as a Border Pedagogy educator, I feel that it is vital to say that it has not been and nor could it ever be a solitary journey. Border Pedagogy taps through encounter, conversation, and the sharing of story the confluence of two nations, cultures, and languages expressed in a passionate desire to create "the best for our children" (Reyes & Halcón, 2001).

The historical failure of mainstream educational policy to provide quality education for Latino students continues every day in borderland classrooms with "few [teachers] question[ing] the inadequacies of the dominant pedagogy, and even fewer examin[ing] the biases in their own attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors" (Halcón, 2001, p. 75).

In reflecting on Border Pedagogy's impact on me and my own students as educators, I have witnessed evidence of Border Pedagogy's power to develop multicultural educators. Border Pedagogy in teacher education is a topic that merits further research because of its evident potential to develop educators that root their practice in the paradox of the border and make a difference for diverse students in borderland schools.

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Correction

Multicultural Education, Volume 14, Number 3

Yih-Jiun Shen, an assistant professor in the College of Education at Texas Tech University, is a co-author of "Interfacing Culture Specific Pedagogy with Counseling: A Proposed Diversity Training Model" that appeared in the Spring 2007 issue of *Multicultural Education* (Volume 14, Number 3), with co-authors, Aretha Faye Marbley, Fred Arthur Bonner II, Sheketa McKisick, Malik S. Henfield, and Lisa M. Watts. Yih-Jiun Shen's name was accidentally omitted when that article was published. The editors of *Multicultural Education* apologize for this error and oversight.