

Where You Are From Defines You: Intersection of Community Engagement, Border Pedagogy, and Higher Education

Karla Loebick

Michigan State University

J. Estrella Torrez

Michigan State University

This article highlights pedagogical practices in an intentionally designed course focused on fostering cross-cultural, multi-level interaction between two undergraduate student groups and Latino youth from the local school district. The study describes how students identify culture, perceive the role and influence of culture, and engage with the notion of border crossing. The community-engaged project, titled Nuestrros Cuentos, uses storytelling and dialogue as an impetus to connect local elementary students with two distinct groups of college students, a residential college and a college assistance migrant program, to support Latino youth in sharing their perspectives of local Latino history. Analysis of this course and the perspectives of students within the discussed community engagement and academic experience yields insight about pedagogical approaches to designing intentional engagement experiences, as well as the positive outcomes related to culture and the increased awareness of cultural borders and border crossing.

Keywords: community engagement, culture, border pedagogy

Introduction

Over the past several decades, higher education institutions have emphasized community engagement as an important part of the academic curriculum (Austin, 2003; Trudeau & Kruse, 2014). Within higher education, engagement is a means to shift from discipline-based models of teaching and learning to an approach focused on learning linked to societal relevance to not only improve society but also to reach goals for higher education (Fitzgerald, Bruns, Sonka, Furco, & Swanson, 2012). Taking many forms, engagement affords opportunities to pursue a plethora of goals, practice a variety of pedagogical approaches (O'Meara, Sandmann, Saltmarch, & Giles, 2011), and produce a multitude of outcomes for faculty, students, and communities. Extant research highlights a wide range of positive outcomes related to these experiences (Bell, Horn, & Roxas, 2007; Butin, 2010). Community-engaged learning is tightly coupled with the cultivation of student tolerance, cooperation, and ability to engage in problem solving and critical thinking about societal and community needs and their associated broader issues (Balciuniene & Natalija, 2008; Woods, Willis, Wright, & Knapp, 2013). Furthermore, central to the goals of community engagement is its use by scholars linking classrooms with communities to enhance student learning, cultural understanding and awareness, and connection to diversity and inclusiveness (Butin, 2010; Driscoll, 2008; Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001; O'Meara et al., 2011). In fact, through collaborations between higher education institutions and the broader community, community engagement is viewed by many as a direct predictor of students' deep community learning (Butin, 2010; Lindholm, Szelenyi, Hurtado, & Korn, 2005; NSSE, 2007) and holds valuable benefits to communities (Butin, 2010; Driscoll, 2008; Ramaley, 2000).

There is not a common, unified definition of community engagement; however, many researchers refer to community engagement as “an active pedagogy committed to connecting theory

and practice, schools and community, the cognitive and the ethical. . . emphasizing real-world learning and reciprocity between postsecondary institutions and communities” (Butin, 2010, p. 3-4). With such diversity in approaches to community engaged pedagogy, engagement activities must consciously attend to the cultural, contextual, and situational factors of each community (Costa & Leong, 2012). Questions about community-engaged pedagogy revolve around strategies for understanding course content, bettering the local or global community, fostering growth of student self-awareness, and addressing issues of diversity, culture and civic responsibility (Butin, 2010).

When examining culture within community engagement practice, it becomes evident that culture and community engagement can be reciprocal wherein “culture can shape the process of community engagement, and in turn, effective engagement would require an understanding of culture” (Graham et al., 2015, p. 4). Just as a singular definition of community engagement is difficult to locate, the same may be said for culture. One body of community engaged scholarship borrows from anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, who provides a structuralist definition of culture. For Geertz (1973), culture is, “a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge and attitudes toward life” (p. 89). Thus, culture within this context is “a complex integrated system of thought and behavior shared by members of a group—a system whose whole pattern allows us to understand the meanings that people attach to specific facts and observations” (Kiefer, 2007, p. 3). Another definition of culture can be drawn from Renato Rosaldo (1989), a cultural anthropologist whose understanding of culture came from his ethnographic work in the Philippines. For Rosaldo (1989), culture encompasses the quotidian activities in one’s life. For Rosaldo, “[h]uman beings cannot help but learn the culture or cultures of the communities within which they grow up . . . Cultures are learned, not genetically encoded” (p. 26). Yet another theory of culture often used is provided through Raymond Williams’s work, who offers a Marxist critique of culture. For Williams (1961), the modern usage of culture encompasses three general categories: the “ideal” culture is the state of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development; the “documentary” is the human experience recorded in intellectual and creative work; and the “social” definition of culture “is a description of a way of life” (p. 57).

In this article, we describe pedagogical practices that facilitate undergraduate experiences and understanding in a university community engagement course titled *Nuestros Cuentos*. This course utilized storytelling and dialogue as an impetus for university undergraduate students to engage with Latino youth at local elementary schools. The objective of the partnership was to engage in meaningful community-building projects across dramatic cultural differences such as age, language, socioeconomic status, and experience.

Integrating “Border Pedagogy” and “Community Engagement”

Given the interesting makeup of the *Nuestros Cuentos* course, topics related to culture were frequently woven into class assignments, readings, and dialogue. Based on recent campus news media highlighting the fragmentation of the general campus student body along racial categories, the course faculty anticipated students would produce borders in class. This divide effectively situated the classroom as a “borderland.” Rosaldo (1989) describes borderlands as the “surface not only at the boundaries of officially recognized cultural units, but also at the less formal intersections, such as those of gender, age, status, and distinctive life experiences” (p. 29). In a

departure from the structuralist definition of culture provided by Geertz, we employ Hayes and Cuban's (1996) work on border pedagogy, Anzaldúa's (1987, 1990) concept of border crossing, and Giroux's (1991, 1992) notion of border pedagogy to frame the *Nuestros Cuentos* course and community engagement experience. The use of "border pedagogy" in community engagement, as described by Hayes and Cuban (1996), "prompts students to understand their own culture in new ways, appreciate cultural differences, become more critically aware of social inequities and power relations, and envision a more democratic society" (p. 1). Border crossing refers to student-identified borders and how these borders stimulate awareness and cultural understanding. Border pedagogy, as defined by Hayes and Cuban (1996), metaphorically represents "how people might gain a more critical perspective on the forms of domination inherent in their own histories, knowledge, and practices, and learn to value alternative forms of knowledge" (p. 6). In this context, *borders* emerged in multiple spaces representing physical, social, emotional, cultural, or identity borders. In educational environments, borders arise multi-dimensionally and can play a critical role in the experiences of students and the process of learning. Further, Hayes and Cuban (1996) expand on the "nonlinear conception of learning . . . [,] the intertwining of identity, thought, and culture in learning" and "the significance of empathy, mutuality, and finding 'similarities across differences'" (p. 7). Border pedagogy was especially helpful when looking into the role that culture can play in the student experience in a classroom or community engagement activity.

Giroux (1992) iterated the "need to create pedagogical conditions in which students become border crossers to understand otherness in its own terms, and to further create borderlands in which diverse cultural resources allow for the fashioning of new identities within existing configurations of power" (p. 28). Border pedagogy argues that educators need to reconsider, clarify, and reframe learning goals to "respect the notion of difference as a part of the common struggle" to "help students become more aware and critical of how inequitable power relationships and forms of domination are reflected and reproduced in various 'texts'" (Hayes & Cuban, 1996, p. 9-10). In this way, *borders* highlight the differences amongst students, and how these distinctions are imbued with socially constructed power dynamics. Giroux (1992) pushes faculty to be attentive to these differences while using that difference as "part of common struggles to extend the quality of public life" (p. 51). Moreover, students are encouraged to examine the existence of these power dynamics and work collaboratively toward interrogating social hierarchies.

Research on particular pedagogical practices exists, but little literature is dedicated to examining student cultural perspectives regarding their actual community engagement experiences, particularly as it pertains to offering valuable insight informing pedagogical methods for teaching and community-based engagement practices (Brammer & Morton, 2014). Thus, this article seeks to further expand discourse on students' cultural perspectives as influenced by community engagement, and perceived effectiveness of pedagogical practices in community engagement experiences.

Guiding Questions for Current Study

This study was designed to highlight pedagogical practices that foster cross-cultural, multi-levelled interaction between two distinct undergraduate student groups and local elementary youth as well as the outcomes related to culture and increased awareness of cultural borders and border crossing. This article focuses on how students interacting in a community engagement experience identify and perceive the following: the role and influence of culture; the pedagogical practices and tools used to stimulate and engage in reflection on and building of awareness of culture; and the

components of the experience which aid students' critical reflection of norms, behaviors, or cultural differences or similarities that stimulate awareness of culture and diversity, and a consciousness of crossing borders. These perspectives provided insight into the following: course format; the impact various assigned activities had on individual awareness and understanding of culture; the effect writing and reading about culture had on student's personal understanding of culture; and what role culture played in the community engagement experience.

Course Design of *Nuestros Cuentos*

To further understand the role of culture in community engagement experiences, through this study we examined the outcomes and experiences of undergraduate university students in a community engagement course offered at a residential liberal arts college within a Midwestern research-intensive university. The college's engagement activities are intended to intertwine experiential learning with reflection to reciprocally benefit undergraduate college students and community partners. Two components guiding experiential learning endeavors within the college are reflection on "presuppositions, assumptions, and obstacles to engagement, especially those relating to transcultural differences and similarities" and gaining competency in cultural understanding (RCAH, n.d.). The focus of these engagement principles, community and cultural understanding, lent itself to exploration of their intersection from an undergraduate student perspective.

For one group of students, this course was designed to fulfill a civic engagement requirement within a residential college (RC). As part of the RC, students are required to complete at least two civic engagement courses to complete their major but they voluntarily select the courses to fulfill this requirement. *Nuestros Cuentos* was intentionally designed to integrate undergraduate students from the RC and students from a partnering first-year College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) as a strategy to foster collaboration and cultural awareness between two distinct groups of students. For the CAMP students, this course was established in response to the students' requests for opportunities to meet other undergraduate student populations and engage with the local Latino community. The course was designed with multiple pedagogical layers to foster a variety of learning objectives including exploring notions of civic engagement, social responsibility, and community, by critically engaging in discussions of identity and community, and developing an awareness of creating learning environments outside of the classroom (Michigan State University, 2014). The course took place in two distinct contexts, in-class and at community sites (i.e. local elementary schools), to accommodate multiple learning contexts.

Class participants were divided using intentional grouping strategies to intermix disciplines, program origination, gender (when possible), and language ability. Collaborative work was a major component of the class with a requirement of maintaining journals, development of literacy activities, and group blogs. To academically support the off-site engagement component, students were assigned course readings examining concepts of culture, race, ethnicity, and oral histories. Additionally, students engaged in class storytelling practices (personal stories). Each group was charged with coordinating one entire class function, and students were required to attend five out-of-class gatherings with their groups.

At the community engagement sites, the college student participants were teamed with a group of six to eight 4th-6th grade students. The undergraduate students were responsible for developing lessons and activities to conduct at their community sites, while managing group and personal reflections about the process throughout the engagement experience. Much of the experi-

ence used to inform student reflections entailed interactions with children and classmates. However, for the intent of this study, data were collected from only the participating undergraduate RC and CAMP students.

Coursework

In class experience. Course readings focused on examining the historical presence of Latinos in Michigan, introduction to community building through storytelling, strategies to assist youth in writing creative pieces, and exploration of culture through intercultural dialogue. The faculty intentionally selected readings that challenged course students to consider the complexity of culture, the fluidity of community, and the use of storytelling in navigating one's own understanding of both concepts. In-class activities were centered on introducing different storytelling practices and building community through intercultural dialogue. Students contributed to course materials by way of facilitating course discussion on student-selected readings, identifying community-building activities that they then would facilitate in class, as well as sharing reflections of their engagement experience.

Out of class experience. Individual groups were charged with writing a collective weekly Tumblr entry, which served as both a space for group reflection and a planning document. This allowed students to integrate various methods of "writing" in the storytelling of their course experience. Student groups also organized whole class social activities with the explicit purpose of exploring the university campus and building a sense of community. Finally, student groups developed storytelling and writing activities to implement with their 4th-6th grade community partners to build relationships and support the youth to tell their stories.

Storytelling and dialogue. Based on the notion that "[s]torytelling is at the core of our humanness" (Horn, 2005, p. 35), the *Nuestros Cuentos* course was organized with storytelling as the central theme used to support Latino youth within the community in sharing their own perspectives of local Latino history. The course explored the "process of storytelling and its importance in telling a communal story" (Michigan State University, 2014). Structurally, the course combined in-class curriculum covering narrative theories, social themes, activities focused on culture, and community engagement based on storytelling with local 4th-6th grade students. Students were introduced to these concepts in class, and then the groups integrated them in storytelling activities to be employed in meetings with the elementary partners. Texts, such as Martha Horn's (2005) "Listening to Nysia: Storytelling as a Way into Writing in Kindergarten," set the stage for the use of storytelling in the class and engagement portions of the course. Examples of activities included writing from prompts generated in class, role-playing based on popular children's stories, sharing family memories, "writing" stories using drawings, and creative writing exercises. The various methods of storytelling established a safe space where all participating students could share their home life experiences, cultural traditions, and their transition to the university campus.

Surrounding the process of storytelling was the consistent presence of dialogue as a method to examine knowledge and understanding, and "frame modes of interaction and directions of inquiry" (Burbules & Bruce, 2001, p. 1106). Dialogue was a regular component of *Nuestros Cuentos*, between the faculty and students, students with students, and students with community partners. Used as a pedagogical tool to stimulate deeper discussion and reflection, dialogue was encouraged and guided to facilitate learning amongst students engaged in similar experiences of exploring culture and community engagement.

Methodology and Data Collection

Data for this study were collected from an undergraduate course specially designed to integrate diverse student populations both on and off campus. Conducted over two consecutive semesters, the study examined both in-class and community engagement components of the course, which was deliberately composed of students from a RC interacting with students from a CAMP program. Though students voluntarily enrolled in the course, the intentional design of integrating the two groups of students ensured a class population from a wide range of academic disciplines, cultural backgrounds, perspectives, and learning styles. The course was constructed with collaborative work at the core of the course experience. University students were partnered with 4th-6th graders from two local elementary schools to “discover the power of telling stories, by way of seeing local Latino history through the eyes of Latino youth” (Michigan State University, 2014). The semester-long course consisted of two weekly sessions, the first was an in-class meeting and the second session took place at the partnering elementary school sites.

For this qualitative study, we employed multiple data collection methods and utilized a variety of source materials throughout both semesters. Class participants completed surveys to help establish a baseline for understanding the foundational goals of the study surrounding culture and border crossing. Observations and field notes were conducted both within the classroom and at two participating community engagement sites over two 14-week periods. A semi-structured focus group and thirteen interviews were conducted, digitally recorded, transcribed, and coded. Lastly, six group blogs per semester were also reviewed and coded. The blogs were maintained by groups of undergraduate students to document group work, community site engagement activities, and reflections about the experience. Two researchers independently analyzed the data and triangulated findings through rigorous discussion about the themes. Undergraduate student responses collected through this study are woven throughout the findings of this article to add context to the information introduced.

Author Backgrounds

To further contextualize this study, both authors had integral experiences that brought them to participate in this course. Estrella Torrez became interested in community engagement projects due to her own experience as a migrant student whose family settled in the Midwest. As a child, Estrella took note that not many of the books lining the classroom shelves mirrored her experience as a Midwestern, bilingual Chicana. In fact, she continued to notice this throughout her undergraduate education. Using her own lived realities, Estrella proposed a collaboration that brought Latino students from the local school district together with students from the local university. The collaboration would encourage students to build community across difference (age, gender, language, ethnicity, geography, etc.) through sharing stories.

Karla Loebick participated in this experience as a course collaborator and graduate fellow. Her interest in the project grew from almost a decade of engagement work and administration of programming with the migrant community. Karla began working with Estrella eight years ago to establish an initial academic, community engagement experience for High School Equivalency Program (HEP) migrant students with residential college (RC) students. Karla’s prior academic and work experience and her learned fluency in Spanish afforded unique perspectives in facilitating and implementing course components and engaging students in reflection of their experience.

The researchers, while both trained in educational studies, entered the project from divergent perspectives. Estrella has the unique perspective of being a migrant farmworker, settled in Michigan, raised bilingual (Spanish and English), trained in educational studies, and faculty in a humanities college. Karla is an experienced administrator of a nationally recognized migrant program, raised in a monolingual English Midwestern home (she later acquired fluency in Spanish through a combination of coursework and employment), and trained in a traditional social sciences education unit. The experiences, separate and layered, formed a critical lens used to view the findings.

Engagement Experience Participants

Study participants consisted of a combined 38 RC and CAMP undergraduate students who were enrolled in *Nuestros Cuentos* and five course assistants over the two semesters of data collection. The RC and CAMP participants self-identified as African American (2), Haitian (1), Latino/Hispanic (26), and European American/Caucasian (9). The five course assistants were all former *Nuestros Cuentos* participants. Undergraduate course assistants were selected to assist with logistical functions of the course, such as facilitating transportation of undergraduate students to the community sites, collecting materials for the school sites (snacks, pencils, art materials, etc.), supervising on-site community engagement endeavors, and gathering the youths' written stories for a book publication at the end of each *Nuestros Cuentos* experience. All students participated in a pre-experience survey, and 13 interviews were conducted with participants who represented a variety of experiences and perspectives. Participants were also representative of different community sites, class groups, RC, and CAMP student populations. The participating students self-selected pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Residential college students. The RC was established to offer students an intimate liberal arts learning environment on a large state university campus. Based on demographic information provided by the Director of Student Affairs, RC students typically fit the following profile: Caucasian, suburban, middle to upper class, whose parents hold postsecondary degrees. In its first years, the college's student body was primarily made up of students from the outer ring of Metropolitan Detroit, Chicago, or Grand Rapids. The students enrolled in this course had various levels of Spanish-language proficiency, ranging from entry-level high school Spanish courses to heritage language fluency. Eleven RC students participated in this study.

College Assistance Migrant Program Students. The second group of students were from the university's CAMP program. CAMP is a federally funded program that assists with the transition of first-year migrant and seasonal farmworker students into higher education via financial, academic, and social support. The CAMP students enrolled in the course had no prior formal background in civic engagement frameworks. Of the twenty-seven enrolled CAMP students, 25 were bilingual in Spanish, one was a monolingual English speaker, and one was trilingual in English, Haitian-Creole, and French. All CAMP participants came from migrant farmworker backgrounds, and a majority of the students hailed from either Texas or Florida, with a small minority representing communities in Southwest Michigan.

Results

Multiple themes arose from the data, which illuminated conceptions of culture as well as various borders and boundaries identified by students. In describing their experiences and through an examination of pedagogical strategies, the following main themes emerged: (1) pedagogical methods supporting border awareness and border crossing, (2) exploration of cultural borders, (3) culture context of community engagement, and (4) strategies used in crossing cultural borders.

Pedagogical Methods Supporting Border Awareness and Border Crossing

For many students, the experience of working with a diverse group that was guided by intentional pedagogical methods such as partnering with local elementary youth, storytelling, dialogue, writing group blogs, and deliberate assignment to groups helped them establish connections and recognize their crossing of social, personal, and cultural identity boundaries within their lives and their communities. Students spoke of crossing borders as a consequence of their engagement with their elementary school students and classmates. Through the process of learning about and engaging in storytelling and dialogue, the undergraduate students were encouraged to reflect on their personal situations, backgrounds, and futures. It was in these moments of intense reflection, which was sometimes strenuous and uncomfortable, that students realized the attributes of connecting with one another, regardless of the borders (or apprehensions) constructed in the beginning of the semester. One student shared on an anonymous survey,

The culture that we have has had impact in our lives to make everything that has happened, happen. [The child's] story, has impacted me in a way that I never thought a story could. It makes you think back and reflect on a lot that has to do with you, your family, people you love and your culture.

Similarly, Reina was surprised by a direct outcome of working with an elementary student,

It was weird for me, for a little girl to tell me all this stuff about her culture. Being so small and knowing what it was . . . I didn't know about my culture until I was older. Her being so small, knowing where she comes from . . . was unexpected for me.

Her involvement with the community engagement component of the course influenced this student so much that, through much reflection and deliberation, she changed her career path,

I think I'm going to change [my major] to Sociology. I liked working with kids, I liked them talking to me . . . talking with them just influenced me that I want to be a guidance counselor or something to do with kids . . . I learned a new part of myself that I didn't know.

Other undergraduate students shared how various course requirements led to the breakdown of discomfort in engaging with peers from differing cultural backgrounds, as well as overcoming barriers between undergraduates and the elementary school. With the development of safe

spaces, both in the classroom and at the community site, they were able to address uncomfortable topics or themes. For example, some activities focused on using shared experiences (a particular holiday or an emotional theme) to tell stories or guide dialogue. This facilitated an opportunity to talk, and sometimes debate, through differences and difficult topics by focusing on the identified guiding theme or “safe” topics. A student shared an example of when she felt the activities helped her overcome discomfort.

[I learned to] break down the barrier of authority between ourselves and the students . . . [through] willing[ness] to share personal stories despite differences. These journals will be to facilitate the construction of our kids’ individual stories and use these as tools to continuously reflect upon personal experiences and knowledge . . . We hope that this will increase each [of our] own sense of personal identity within our group.

Another student expressed her initial fear of and then her appreciation for the intentional grouping methods used.

Working with the other students from another culture, I gained trust. I gained being able to work with other students from different cultures to get stuff done, not just focus on me, but focus on our group and what we have to do.

Within these contexts, intentional pedagogical tools not only facilitated the collaborative work between students, but also yielded awareness of strategies to navigate through feelings of power differentials and socially constructed borders.

Exploration of Definitions of Culture

The first day of class, students randomly selected their seating yet sat according to program origination. The aisle separating the two rows of tables became a literal border separating the CAMP and RC students. The language used on either side of the aisle became an audible representation of the divide. While these student populations were intentionally selected to participate in the course due to their differing lived realities, the manifestation of these differences illustrated the extent of their socially constructed divisions. At one point, in the first few weeks of the semester, following a discussion of Susan Engel’s text (1994) “The Stories Children Tell: Making Sense of the Narratives of Childhood,” the students vocalized the “cultural difference” in class. One student emphasized the spatial difference manifestation with “We (CAMP) students are here, and they (RC) students are over there.” This comment opened the gates to a lively dialogue of how these “differences” create borders that can limit one’s ability to “get to know one another.”

To understand how the students’ perceptions of culture influenced their experiences, the researchers gathered a foundational understanding of the ways in which students identified culture and personal cultural borders prior to and during engagement in the course. Students were asked questions relating to culture on the pre-experience survey as well as during the focus group and interviews. Questions included inquiring about student explanation of the meaning of culture and identifying aspects of their culture. Later in the experience, students were asked to further describe their own cultural borders and ways in which they observed and crossed borders within the course.

Interestingly, responses provided by RC and CAMP student groups paralleled one another, yet slight differences arose to distinguish each group. Not surprisingly, a majority of student responses identified culture through personal characteristics, values, and beliefs stemming from their upbringing and family influence.

It is essential to note that although RC students presented clear definitions of culture through their surveys and interviews, in their observable interactions and dialogue during class the RC students often presented a somewhat depersonalized approach to culture. RC students struggled to articulate culture or view themselves within culture, creating a clear distinction between the way they talked about and contextualized culture and how they personally defined it. Though the majority of RC definitions aligned with Rosaldo's (1989) notion of culture, wherein culture is learned and lived "in the informal practices of everyday life" (p. 26), the observable, in-class understandings of culture more aligned with Geertz' (1973) systems approach or external view toward culture. Many RC responses alluded to learning about culture through reading or studying, and observing culture as a tangible thing within their or "others'" lives. CAMP students, on the other hand, presented culture as a lived experience, as a part of their life that "just is," something that exists within every component of their lives. The definitions of culture are, as Silvestrini (1997) explicates, "better understood when seen in the particular context of experience. Although culture changes over time and with experience, it provides a common basis of understanding; it is understood as the basis of who we are" (p. 43). The students' responses illustrate the extent to which this is true, particularly as they were encouraged to dialogue across "cultural borders."

RC student responses. The RC student formal survey and interview responses centralized on culture being a way of thinking, responsibility, values, and morals, and referred to education, success, and social interaction as major components of their cultures. For example, Marge reflected how personal circumstances influence culture,

Culture, has a lot to do with where you come from, where you are and it changes throughout your life; what place you are in your life when you ask the question and what factors played out in your life to make a culture around you. The things that you name about yourself, accept and admit about yourself, are part of your culture.

In this quote, Marge recognizes the constant evolution of one's cultural identity as reflective of upbringing and surroundings through the movement and adaptation of culture throughout life. Further elaborating on the notion of identity in culture, Elvia expressed how individuals seek out and find their culture, and emphasized intimacy in defining culture. Elvia shared,

[Culture is] an identity that someone is born into in a way but they have to find it themselves . . . as part of where they live. It is like the step up from community, it's more like American culture, so we're born into that and we have to find what it means to us 'cause it means something different to every person. It's really important and it's hard to try and live life without identifying with a culture.

Elvia explored culture's many layers, implicit and explicit, individualized and personal, and how each person must find their own identity within a broader cultural context.

Another way of identifying culture extended around environment. Dreamer shared, "I identify [culturally] halfway with my environmental culture and social culture . . . I think it's more

nurture versus nature. The nurture side of it is where you came from, your ideas, your morals, where you get your sense of self.” Again, this approach to culture infers an essence of learning and development of culture. Similarly, JJ offered his thoughts on how culture involves group actions and behaviors,

Culture means family. It means a body of people that work together ideally to achieve some type of goal. It’s to be knowledgeable and respectful of others, considerate, and that takes time, experience, effort and energy, failure and being out of your comfort zone in order to really connect with it.

Culture, as described by the above students, is both an individual and communal construction. Individuals are “born” into particular cultures; however, it is an individual choice and exploration of learning to expand beyond socially constructed limitations. Interestingly, students identified the fluidity of culture while acknowledging the permanence of particular lessons from cultural communities on an individual’s life choices.

Providing a broader definition, some students discussed culture as a disposition or consisting of the values which guide their thinking or living. Kat expressed,

Culture is embedded in your way of thinking . . . things like the way you speak . . . how you dress, what kinds of food you eat, and what you value. If you spend a lot of time with your family, or your language, a whole bunch of different things. That’s really broad, but that’s what makes you, you.

Kat’s description of culture gestures toward Williams’s “social” definition of culture. Culture for these students expressed a certain set of values (Williams, 1961). It was the recognition of the specific aspects making up one’s culture that allowed for the students to be “respectful” of others and encouraged pushing outside of one’s “comfort zone.”

CAMP student responses. CAMP student responses often included lived characteristics, or components involving family, traditions, race, ethnicity, food, upbringing, and morals. This aligns with Rosaldo’s (1989) definition of culture as being learned. The majority of responses portrayed culture as inherent in their family lives, ways of living, food, religion, and other everyday components of their lives and included application of culture related to familial and personal values to their own lives. Reina stated,

Culture, for me, defines my ethnicity, background and where I come from. We celebrate some holidays that other people don’t celebrate. My religion has to do with it because of my culture and has a real big influence in my life. Culture defines who I am, how I am towards people, and how I portray myself to the world.

Similar to Kat’s description of culture, Reina points toward practices attributed to one’s culture. For Kat and Reina, culture is a practice, and can be used as an outward marker of one’s identity. These practices are organized around specific cultural institutions, and for Reina, that means culture is organized around religion. It is in these moments that students, such as Reina, were able to exercise the power in their culture.

Other students articulated a definition of culture directly linked to ethnicity. For example,

Bonita added, “Culture is a group of people with the same set of beliefs. It could be religious or just about your own ethnic background.” Whereas Leona’s definition connected ethnicity to cultural practices, “Culture is basically where you come from, your roots. I see my culture as food and stuff like how people dress. I notice a lot of people have different views on things because of their culture. Basically, where you’re from kind of defines, makes you who you are.” For Leona, culture directly mapped onto ethnicity. Elaborating on ethnicity and family values, one respondent expressed, “Culture is just the different customs, values and ways of life of different groups of people whether based on race or ethnicity or different ways that you perform like religion, or other customs.”

Similarly, Myra used her family to explain how culture was constructed in her life. “My culture is pretty much Mexican culture. Growing up in a strict household, traveling to Mexico, growing up with traditions pretty much flat out from my grandparents and my parents.” One student revealed culture, as it stems from family relationships, is a support system, “Culture defines my strength due to my family . . . our bond never breaks. We’re always together.” This statement aligns with classroom dialogue observations underscoring the power drawn from culture to create support networks for CAMP students. For this group of students, the significance of family and community was a current running through most in-class dialogues.

Emphasizing customs and heritage, another student identified culture as, “a certain belief and customs people relate to. Culture to me, is my heritage and the things I grew up believing in.” The direct link to family and culture emerged in a significant portion of the CAMP student responses where phrases were prevalent such as “[t]he way you were raised based on where you are from,” “family-oriented,” “what is within and what we were born into,” “who a person is . . . the root of a person,” “morals and a strong family base,” “strong family ethics and morals,” and “religion and morals.” The interwoven definitions of culture with family and heritage show a tight alignment of both material culture and cultural practices to the CAMP student lived experience.

In summary, the responses from the RC students revealed culture as focused on identity, reflection of self in relation to surroundings and environment, and theoretical based components of personal and familial culture. Responses from CAMP participants included culture as centralized on family and relationship to family, heritage, race, ethnicity, and familial background and roots. However, when combining the responses from both groups of students, we are left with a contextualized working definition of culture and views of student identified cultural borders as foundations of where one comes from, including the values, morals, customs, beliefs and family traditions, and the way one lives, thinks, and identifies oneself and family.

The Interplay of Culture and Community Engagement

The main focus of this course was storytelling, yet engaging with individual understandings of culture was present as an intentional, secondary component of the course to help enrich the stories and experiences of participants. Upon entering the course and experience, many students discussed anticipated barriers or challenges prior to participating in the course. Despite their deep-seated beliefs in the significance culture plays in everyday life, the majority of students didn’t initially anticipate that culture would have significant influence on their overall in-class experience. Throughout the semester, after more thorough discussions and dialogue, students reflected with more depth and revealed the influence of culture on their experience. To better understand the significance of culture on the experience and how the experience helped confront, minimize,

or erase any anticipated anxiety, interviewees were asked various questions relating to culture, including: How has this experience with community engagement helped you think about culture/ become more aware of culture? Has this experience helped you reflect on your own story relating to your culture? What do you think you gained from working with students from another culture? How did reading and writing about culture make you think about your culture?

The role of cultural and language diversity. Prior to the experience, a variety of challenges and anxieties were shared by students. One commonly expressed sentiment, found in the pre-course surveys, centered on working and connecting with elementary school students. One student shared, “I am nervous that I won’t relate to the students because of our differences in culture.” Students going into the experience inadvertently created cultural borders; however, they anticipated the necessary crossing of these constructed borders. Expanding on overcoming the fear of cultural difference, Ronald shared,

I’ve learned that in the end, even though we are thousands of miles apart, there’s a lot of similarities. Where I come from, Texas, and these guys from Michigan. Even though we’ve come from completely different backgrounds we still have the same set of moral values. Even as little kids you see the similarities. I guess in the end, we’re all the same.

Another barrier that caused apprehension for students was the inability to communicate effectively with groupmates. One student revealed fear of “not being able to communicate with the kids [elementary school partners].” Several native English students also initially expressed their anxiety of using the Spanish language in front of native Spanish speakers, both with their classmates and engagement site children. Similarly, a native Spanish speaker expressed apprehension about using a second language with the elementary students and her peers, “What makes me nervous is to speak in front of the class. . . English is not my first language, and I think I’m going to make mistakes or I don’t say correctly.” Anxiety created by language abilities established a perceived barrier to community building; yet, in the end, it resulted in a crucial point for constructing community. Students used their peer’s linguistic abilities as a tool in connecting with the elementary students and families, meaning the students developed bilingual activities to encompass the linguistic variation of all participants.

Through the experience, another consistent theme arose: despite cultural or language barriers, the engagement experience helped minimize challenges and highlight “universal languages” that helped to minimize barriers or anxiety when working within their groups. One group shared via blog, “Even with our group having dominant Spanish speakers, we are still able to communicate fabulously with laughter. I suppose a smile is the same in every language and culture.” Another student shared her realization of storybooks as a “base to transmit values,” despite linguistic differences, and develop tolerance and understanding.

The role of peer and cultural interactions. Students shared their anxiety of approaching the class with “many unknowns,” while others expressed nervousness in encountering challenges that they feared may arise from freshmen working with upperclassmen, maintaining course requirements while juggling other classes, and balancing work schedules. There was anxiety around how different students hold contrasting values pertaining to school and academic work. Furthermore, the intensity of scheduling, participating in group projects, and separating and sharing efforts with group work caused some initial anxiety. On the survey, one student wrote, “The assignments that

are due on Tumblr and working in a group make me nervous. I want to get a good grade in the class.” Comments such as this were a clear indication that students were willing to cross cultural borders, even if their willingness was driven by grades.

Student apprehension was quite visible the first day of class, when RC and CAMP students sat on entirely opposite sides of the classroom. In approaching the reasoning behind this initial seating arrangement, students intimated it was an action of comfort. Students expressed the divide was a result of not feeling comfortable with “the other” group of students, and an uncertainty in approaching one another. As the dialogue progressed, students began to reflect on culture and expand their understanding of what it means in diverse contexts. Interestingly, students shared that their perspectives of culture were influenced by interactions with their classmates. Original notions of culture were challenged once students organically developed relationships with classmates from different backgrounds. In fact, students stated they had “gained friends” and “interacted with people [they] otherwise would not have had the opportunity to connect with.” It was in these moments of border crossing that students interrogated personal definitions of culture and considered how culture can be a fluid notion.

With astounding segregation during the first few weeks of class, some students entered the course with fear, nerves, and pessimism. However, by mid-semester, students identified a “lack of difference” and “importance of different strengths and opinions” in the learning process and interactions with community engagement site participants. Sara expressed, “. . . [I] realiz[ed] that you shouldn’t be afraid at all to interact with people from different cultures because once you do you’re probably going to find that you have a lot more in common than you have different.” Over time, students began to realize how culture and the shared educational context aided in enhancing understanding while minimizing fear of difference. Marge discussed that “culture, differences and similarities, provides an entry point to identify with someone but more depth and understanding is needed for sustained connections, such as like we are doing with community engagement.” While the classroom began as a borderland rife with palpable divisions, the anxiety of working with “people from different cultures” was shared by all. Over the course of the semester, the students verbalized their frustration with the borders, as well as their reflections of the impact generated by these boundaries.

In a class discussion, Ronald acknowledged that socially constructed cultural borders exist, but to cross these boundaries one must look at the bigger picture. He shared,

Mankind as a whole, we all are driven to tell stories and listen to stories. That really stood out to me because it’s true. I never really thought about it, but as a whole, mankind we’re all rooted the same. That really stood out, the way the lessons are people as a whole.

From the first day of class, the course was driven by intentionally constructed pedagogy to target challenges or anxieties that were anticipated, or that arose throughout the semester. The course used a variety of strategies to explore storytelling and the idea of culture, particularly in relation to the community engagement experience. As a result of the combination of learning contexts, pedagogical strategies, and intentional intercultural interactions, a community culture amongst the undergraduate students grew as they better understood how culture is fluid and relational.

Crossing Cultural Borders

As students progressed through the experience, many understood their own culture in new ways and delved deeper into the meaning and implications of cultural and social norms that impact border crossing. One student revealed recognition of social borders, “We change the way that we tell stories to fit in socially [and] to define ourselves in a particular way. The types of stories that we feel comfortable sharing depend not only on the audience . . . but the context of the story.” The change in the narrative became a response to the storyteller’s comfort level, as well as the assumed responsibility to comfort their audience. Furthering this notion, JZ shared the impact of this experience, “[it] opened up my mind and how we can actually change a person’s mindset... People don’t know what someone actually goes through unless they go through it themselves. That was a big shock to me. It made me think about my culture and the background that I come from.” The students’ responses speak to using storytelling as a device to not only connect with the world beyond the self, but also to help know oneself on another level (hooks, 2010, p. 52-3). Students recognized the power assigned to particular groups, and the impact this had on their culture. Therefore, students used storytelling to not only invite peers to experience life through their eyes, but also as a device to establish trust prior to crossing cultural borders. Eventually, students pushed beyond their comfort zones through faculty-directed activities encouraging an awareness of cultural boundaries and the use of cultural flexibility strategies to move outside of these socially constructed borders.

Cultural flexibility. After reading an assignment highlighting the theme of cultural flexibility (Valencia & Black, 2002), Sara began to explore new perspectives defining “culture.” She spoke about her awareness of cultural flexibility in new situations,

[The experience] made me think about how flexible I am with interacting with people [from] other cultures ‘cause I feel like I always think that I’m open to other cultures but then when I get into that situation I am a little nervous about it so I think it made me think about that and sort of come at meeting people from other cultures with a new perspective.

During a focus group, Lola applied what she had learned from the class reading about cultural flexibility (Valencia and Black, 2002). Through in-class dialogue, Lola revealed the consequences she encounters in her crossing borders, “People tell me that I’m acting white but I’m just trying to succeed . . . I have to do it, it’s just something you do . . . to succeed. Being culturally flexible is my reality, not a choice.” In this statement, Lola recognizes the stigma placed upon non-White cultures as being unsuccessful. She highlights that for those who strive to succeed (either academically or financially) they must negotiate their own cultural communities and borders, while struggling to overcome barriers encountered by people of color. Lola articulates a clear power dynamic assigned within (racialized) cultural groups. Moreover, she is aware of the strategies needed to navigate these socially constructed borders.

Awareness of cultural borders. While Lola approached cultural boundaries as a reality, Marge addressed cultural borders with a unique awareness toward maintaining connectedness. She stated,

It's directly forcing me to look at those differences and battle with them in a way that brings out something that is beneficial for everybody else . . . People are different and they should be proud of being different and being wonderful, unique and awesome . . . [be] able to celebrate the differences that they have, but also to be able to acknowledge them and be able to create . . . something that in its essence is innately human and can connect with all of us in some way.

JZ elaborated on his awareness of borders,

We ended up noticing that we're almost the same, a lot of us have the same interests. That's when I think when we were really just the same, we're just classified as CAMP or [RC] outside of the classroom, but inside of class we're just one group of [college] students.

In this statement, this student highlighted similarities to underscore that despite their different paths to the university, they all were struggling to situate themselves as part of the university community. Similar to Marge and JZ, Bonita revealed how, throughout the course, the CAMP and RC groups that were initially quite separate and distinctly "different" came together as a united group.

At that point culture didn't matter inside the classroom because we were all one team, one person towards one goal. The classroom culture didn't matter. In the site it mattered a little because some of us know a little more about the Latino culture than others. My peer, she didn't know much about Latino culture but I was there to help her out and explain it to her. She understood what we were, what our culture is and just a little piece of it, but she understood just because of the fact that I was able to explain to her.

Bonita's strategy to engage her cultural knowledge as a tool in reversing the power dynamic was a common strategy used throughout the semester. All three of these students represented a common theme within this experience: awareness. Though each student approached the semester with diverse perspectives and all expected to experience some level of friction in navigating the experience, the majority became aware of how their unique perspectives contributed to the experience. Despite existing borders, both for individuals and groups, students were able to collaboratively discover strategies to work towards united goals and establish a safe space for navigating conscious and unconscious borders.

Discussion and Conclusion

In an ever-increasing intercultural, globalized world, there is a critical need for college and university graduates to have cultural and inclusive competence. The use of community engagement and service-learning practices in higher education has grown tremendously over the past few decades as a high-impact practice and experiential learning tool. On a macro level, community engagement promotes civic engagement, engenders democratic ideals, and fosters belonging to a broader society (Barber, 1992; Butin, 2010; Hatcher & Bringle, 2012). On a micro level, the individual gains a greater understanding of diversity; an awareness of societal issues, challenges,

and concerns; and an enhanced connection to service and engagement (Butin, 2010; Coles, 1993; Hatcher & Bringle, 2012). In recent years, there has been much debate on the foundational principles and goals of these practices, and the outcomes and effectiveness of such experiences (Butin, 2010). This study illuminates the experiences of students in a multicultural, community engagement experience with pedagogical practices that foster distinct outcomes when focusing on culture and notions of border crossing.

In working with distinct student groups and using a variety of methods and strategies for learning and interacting, the interchanges amongst peers yielded various intended and unintended outcomes on multiple levels. Using intentional grouping methods to mix first year college students with sophomore, junior, and senior students, as well as integrating the CAMP and RC students, resulted in a component of academic role modeling. Students were able to navigate cultural and power dynamics to learn from one another and gain perspective from other students. Further, though there were often challenges in overcoming tension in becoming aware of and crossing borders, there was an opportunity to gain cultural capital by working closely with students from different backgrounds, social classes, religions, etc. Students intimately collaborated on projects and assignments and observed different ways of being, communicating, and learning. These observations allowed students to model and perform new academic and personal behaviors, and work through any existing or perceived power dynamics, thus intensifying both the experience and academic rigor. Another component that arose as influential in the experience is language immersion. Both in class and at the community site, students gained valuable experience using both the English and Spanish languages.

A powerful pedagogical component that is unique to this course is the plethora of leadership opportunities afforded to students as they took on different roles and learned from one another. This course was intentionally structured to provide opportunities for all participants to gain leadership experience. Leadership roles ranged from language translation, curriculum and activities development, and group storytelling exercises, to online blog posting, organizing out-of-class group activities, writing assignments, and preparing thought-provoking questions and reflections for class. Leadership took place both in the classroom and at the community engagement sites, between peers, and with the community site children. With the multi-layered course design, the professor maximized participation and valuable learning experiences for students offering a usable, adaptable experiential model for civic engagement courses.

This approach and multi-layered course design supported another essential component of the course: the syllabus. As in many academic courses, the syllabus is intended to be a guide through a course, a space for guidance, expectations, goals, etc. In this course, the explicit statement, “this syllabus is a working document and subject to change,” made it a truly mobile syllabus from beginning to end. The syllabus required constant assessment to reflect awareness of the happenings and learning within the class, thereby facilitating the experience and providing support in both the physical and emotional experience of each student. This flexibility allowed for adding or removing texts or assignments, or using supplemental materials to foster exploration of topics that arose within a class or at a community site. Because many opportunities for learning and challenges for progress developed within the context of students gaining awareness of and crossing borders, it was essential to maintain a flexible approach to the course to accommodate and encourage students in their learning experience. Many times, this required varying levels of sensitivity, support, and guidance to help students not only confront borders, but move past conflicts that may arise during the process.

The collection of data and the use of intentional dialogue with students allowed the faculty further insight to the thoughts and processing of personal and group experiences throughout the course. Though some borders were expected within the course such as ethnicity, program of orientation, academic focus, year in college, language, etc., others were unpredicted or underestimated. Not only did the course and experience present a unique opportunity for cross-cultural, multi-leveled interaction, it brought together two student groups who otherwise would not have interacted. Despite the fact that the course began with two distinct groups of undergraduate students (first year, first generation CAMP students and second through fourth year RC students), throughout the duration of the course, the groups gradually transformed into seeing themselves as one community of learners. By the end of the semester, students referenced themselves as a group of university students rather than using their separate, distinct group identifiers. The intentional construction of the experience, although highlighting cultural differences and similarities by selecting specific groups of students, helped minimize differences and heighten awareness of humanistic similarities and inherent characteristics of college students working together for a joint cause.

In examining the experiences of the undergraduate participants in the *Nuestros Cuentos* course results, three overlapping concepts emerged. First, through the intentional use of dialogue, RC and CAMP students reflected upon the multi-dimensionality of culture and its impact within their community engagement experience. Second, by reflecting on the community engagement experience, participants identified their personal and collective responsibility as role models for the local elementary student partners. Students' actions of exploring culture and their lived experience through intercultural collaborations and interactions modeled inclusive and accepting behaviors of crossing borders for the youth partners. These actions and the engagement with storytelling created safe spaces to learn about and connect with each other and the community site children. Lastly, through the course design and faculty-organized student groupings, participants intentionally negotiated cross-cultural borders through intercultural dialogue.

Throughout the two semesters of *Nuestros Cuentos* included in this study, the faculty gained extensive insight into their own perspectives surrounding culture and cultural borders that exist within the structure of the course, as well as pedagogical areas for improvement and enhancement for the course. Through reflection on the experience within the context of their responsibilities in the course and with the students, they engaged with the community and tackled the process of becoming aware of and crossing borders. Pedagogically, this course went beyond the traditional teaching or facilitation of a service-learning course and spearheading complicated logistics. It encompassed many fast-changing roles, including coaching, mentoring, administering, evaluating, moderating, questioning, supporting, reconstructing, listening, negotiating, and more.

This course and the experiential outcomes for its student participants reveals a positive learning experience using community engagement, storytelling, and dialogue to enhance awareness of and reflection on culture. This research helps faculty and other professionals conceptualize intentional learning environments and practices to foster meaningful community engagement and academic experiences. This model of teaching and engaged learning presents an approach that supports integration and diversity with experiential learning opportunities and community engagement. This study also presents a case example that can be studied independently or used in comparisons to other case examples or community sites, as well as provide academic topics for future research with other student populations. Overwhelmingly, participants in this study expressed a desire for more opportunities to interact with groups of students they otherwise would not be

likely to encounter in their daily routines or disciplines. The strong positive outcomes and personal experiences of participants with crossing personal and cultural borders justifies further research and consideration.

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Appendix A: Course Readings

[Please note these readings are a portion of the readings assigned in class. The course readings shifted in response to student needs.]

- Badillo, D. (2003). *Latinos in Michigan (pp.1-36)*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press.
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Authors

Karla Loebick is a doctoral candidate in the Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education program through the Michigan State University College of Education. Karla is a current Faculty Fellow with the Bailey Scholars Program at MSU where she has taught five courses and is a Graduate Fellow for the MSU Graduate School. Her research interests focus on student success, international learning opportunities and contexts, learning experiences in diverse contexts, intercultural and community engagement, and experiential pedagogy. Reinforcing her interests are her experiences with international service and teaching, continual involvement in and work with multiple international study abroad service-learning and academic programs, professional work history with first-generation college students, diverse student populations, and underrepresented learners. Karla's experiences includes teaching at the university, community college, and K-12 levels, almost ten years directing a High School Equivalency Program for migrant and seasonal farmworkers, advising service-learning interns and AmeriCorps members, and consulting in curriculum and training development.

J. Estrella Torrez, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the Residential College in the Arts and Humanities (RCAH) at Michigan State University. Her research centers on language politics and the importance of community-based knowledge, particularly among rural Latino families and urban Indigenous youth. In 2009, Torrez co-founded the Indigenous Youth Empowerment Program (IYEP), a program serving urban Native youth and families in Michigan. She presently serves as IYEP's co-director and facilitates an afterschool program for youth in Kindergarten through twelfth grades, as well as organizes a summer cultural camp for Greater Lansing area urban Indigenous youth. In her tenure at MSU, she has taught five experiential-based university courses on Latino and Indigenous issues in Mexico and the US Southwest, as well as four on-campus collaborative courses with Migrant Student Services. In the spring of 2013, she initiated the *Nuestros Cuentos/Gadabaajimowinaanin* collaborative project with the College Assistance Migrant Program, Lansing School District, and local Indigenous communities. *Nuestros Cuentos/Gadabaajimowinaanin* brings together students from MSU's RCAH and CAMP with 4th-6th grade Lansing Latino and Indigenous youth in a storytelling project. The project results in a fully illustrated children's book sharing the Latino and Indigenous youths' experiences of living in Michigan. Since the inception of *Nuestros Cuentos*, over seventy children have had their stories published in three volumes. In addition to her community-based research, Dr. Torrez scholarly interests include the intersection of critical pedagogy, civic engagement, multicultural education, Indigenous education and socio-cultural literacy.