

How to Increase Awareness about the Issues Relating to the Indigenous Cultures of the Americas

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Introduction

Teaching for cultural understanding has always posed many challenges regarding exactly what should be taught and how it should be presented. For instance: should students be taught a list of facts about another culture, which may lead to stereotyping? Should there be comparison between one's own and another culture, which may involve dealing with student attitudes, emotions, and beliefs? Should students learn about festivals, customs, literature, and food or should there be a greater focus on monuments and historic sites, which may lead to important omissions? (Omaggio Hadley, 2001). In addition to the difficult content selection process, professors often feel unprepared to teach students about a culture different from their own, since culture involves interdisciplinary knowledge. Moreover, once the content selection has been completed, professors need to address more general pedagogical issues. Research has shown that traditional lecture methods, in which professors talk and students listen, are less effective than "active learning" methods whereby students are actively engaged in higher-order thinking tasks, such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). Thus, professors need to find ways in which students are actively engaged and able to experience the culture. This paper discusses how these challenges to teaching cultural understanding have been addressed by two professors in two different courses: Humanities 460: *Language and Culture in Indigenous California*, taught by Prof. Jany, and Spanish 370: *Literature of the Conquest*, taught by Prof. Gallegos-Ruiz.

Humanities 460 is designed to introduce students to and enlighten them about the indigenous peoples of the southland region and to raise their awareness of linguistic, cultural, and social issues related to local and other indigenous communities in California. It undertakes a general look at their languages, cultures, history, music, and traditions. Specific topics include Serrano language, history, and culture, the relationship between language and culture, language and thought, language and history, and language and music, language ideologies, and language loss and revitalization. Thus, Humanities 460 provide a broad overview of the issues relating to the languages and cultures of indigenous communities in California and confronts students' misconceptions about these cultures including that indigenous communities have long vanished, that they no longer speak their languages and that tribal members live on government benefits and don't pay taxes. Prof. Jany, although familiar with the history, linguistic issues, and many cultural aspects of California indigenous communities is not a member of such a community and is thus a cultural outsider. This poses a challenge in developing active learning opportunities for the students.

Spanish 370 surveys Latin American Literature from the fifteenth through the seventeenth century. Though the course title suggests a literature written only by Spaniards during that period, Prof. Gallegos-Ruiz dedicates a large portion of the course to indigenous literatures written prior to the Conquest. This overcomes most students' lack of awareness that the indigenous peoples of Latin America developed their own writing

systems and therefore had their own literature in pictographical and ideographical forms. Moreover, students learn that many of the original indigenous writings were destroyed and only a few codices remain today. In contrast to these losses, Prof. Gallegos Ruiz introduces literature being created by Latin American indigenous writers today. The assigned reading selections on literature of the Conquest emphasize how the European conquerors viewed the indigenous peoples at the time of the historical encounter and how misconceptions about the indigenous peoples were created, passed on, and are still prevalent today.

Literature Review: Teaching for Cultural Understanding

Language and culture are inseparable and language teaching can lead to a greater cross-cultural understanding and, thus, a mutual acceptance among the world's people. Despite general agreement on these points, there is little consensus on what aspects of culture should be taught. Because culture is multi-dimensional and cuts across disciplines, professors may feel uncomfortable teaching aspects of culture that fall outside of their field of expertise. This makes content selection particularly challenging. Culture may be taught as a series of facts – which are in a constant state of flux, i.e. life-style changes, and may not apply equally across social strata, or as processes (Omaggio Hadley 2001). Lafayette (1988) proposes a simple, direct approach to teaching culture that includes the following components:

- a. knowledge of formal high culture,
- b. knowledge of popular or everyday culture,
- c. affective objectives, such as cultural differences,
- d. multicultural objectives, such as understanding culture of target language-related ethnic groups, and
- e. process objectives, such as evaluating statements about the culture and developing research skills.

Omaggio Hadley (2001) presents several ways of teaching culture: 1) brief lectures with follow-up activities, 2) using native informants, 3) audio- and video-taped interviews with or dialogues between native informants, and 4) using readings and realia. In the next section, we will discuss how these practices have been incorporated into the two courses: Hum 460 and Spanish 370.

Best Practices

The two professors have approached the challenges identified above in similar, yet distinct ways.

For **Humanities 460: *Language and Culture in Indigenous California***, Prof. Jany provided students with the opportunity to directly learn from tribal members and to actively learn one of the local indigenous languages. Hum. 460 met twice a week. Once a week, Prof. Jany held her regular lecture utilizing PowerPoint presentations, videos, class discussions, and in-class exercises. The second weekly class meetings were devoted to guest speakers. Dr. Ernest Siva, member of the Morongo Band of Mission Indians and a trained musician, lectured students about local history, Native American and especially local indigenous music, and the creation story and other important indigenous stories. Moreover, in several question and answer sessions, Dr. Siva addressed many of the

misconceptions about local tribes, such as their dependency on the federal government, tribal lands, and certain rituals. In addition to Dr. Siva, Marcus Smith, the lead linguist of the San Manuel Band of Mission Indian, taught the students how to speak Serrano, the local indigenous language. These materials were fully integrated into the curriculum and formed part of the homework and exams. In addition to presenting guest speakers, Prof. Jany showed videotaped interviews of a now deceased tribal elder, a local indigenous artist, and a local indigenous storyteller, each a member from a distinct local tribe. To foster active learning, students also researched local place names stemming from indigenous languages, among other topics.

For **Spanish 370: *Literature of the Conquest***, Prof. Gallegos-Ruiz utilizes indirect transcriptions of indigenous texts that were compiled by Amerindians educated by Spaniards, who recorded in the Latin alphabet cultural traditions and interpretations of old ideographic writings such as:

- a. the Popol Vuh (1554-1558);
- b. the Maya-Quiche text where the creation of the Mayan civilization is outlined;
- c. the Chilam Balam, another Mayan text;
- d. the poetry of the Aztec emperor-poet Netzahualcoyotl;
- e. the compilations on Incan culture and tradition of the Peruvian Felipe Guamán Poma; and
- f. the compilations of oral accounts by the Nahuatl peoples of the arrival of the conquistadors recorded by Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl.

Students, who are surprised that indigenous people continue to write in their own languages, then read texts by contemporary indigenous writers, using the writers' own translations from the original indigenous language texts (*Escritores en lenguas indígenas 2008*). These readings familiarize them with issues of concern to indigenous peoples today. To expand students' knowledge about these under-studied topics, they are assigned an oral presentation for which they research other indigenous writers and writers of the Conquest of America not studied in class. Students are encouraged to employ visual media in these presentations. Assigned readings also include original accounts by the Conquistadors that provide the European perspective. In addition, to encourage critical thinking about the Conquest of America, students read scholarly analyses such as chapters from Tzvetan Todorov's *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (1982) and Peter Hulme's article Columbus and the Cannibals (1986). As an outside activity, students view films, such as *The Other Conquest*, and write reaction papers on specific topics. To foster class discussions, Prof. Gallegos-Ruiz's regular lectures include PowerPoint presentations, videos, and group work.

Conclusions

Each of the professors navigated specific challenges in teaching these two courses. In **Humanities 460**, to stimulate student interest and overcome misconceptions, Prof. Jany emphasized providing firsthand experiences with contemporary California indigenous cultures. Central to this approach was including the participation of tribal elder Ernest Siva as a regular guest lecturer who drew on his own life history to address a full range of students' questions. Active learning, such as the mini-language-classes in which students learned Siva's indigenous language, Serrano, was incorporated into instruction

and assessment to enrich the student learning experience and complement the class readings and Prof. Jany's lectures. As a result, students emerged with increased intercultural awareness and competence as well as with a greater appreciation of the indigenous contribution to California history and culture.

A deep and profound understanding of culture is paramount to content selection for a course such as Spanish 370. For Prof. Gallegos-Ruiz, as a Latin Americanist who is currently researching contemporary Mexican indigenous writers, teaching indigenous cultures presented little challenge in terms of cultural understanding. However, she did face pedagogical challenges. Since her approach is based on reading original texts past and present, Prof. Gallegos-Ruiz found that too many assigned readings become tedious for students, especially when the majority of the assigned readings are written in archaic Spanish. To make the subject matter interesting, she successfully employed as instructional tools visual media and contemporary realia that demonstrated indigenous customs as a living tradition. In the future, she is considering incorporating foods in order to demonstrate how they represent a hybridization of European and indigenous cultures.

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Appendices

Useful videos for Humanities 460

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ShZGxVdxvBU>
- *The Wellbriety Journey for Forgiveness*, a documentary about the healing process of indigenous peoples
- DVDs of the Humanities 460 class co-taught with Dr. Ernest Siva in 2009 (stored at the CSUSB library)

Readings for Humanities 460

- Hinton, L. (1994). *Flutes of Fire: Essays on California Indian Languages*. Heyday Books. Berkeley, CA. ISBN: 978-0-930588-62-5.
- Siva, E. (2004). *Voices of the Flute: Songs of Three Southern California Indian Nations*. Ushkana Press. Banning, California. ISBN: 0-9754496-0-5.
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Useful videos for Spanish 370

- *Cabeza de Vaca*. Dir. Nicolás Echeverría. Sreeplay. Nicolás Echeverría and Guillermo Sheridan, Independent Film, 1994
- *The Other Conquest*. Dir. Salvador Carrasco. Prod. Alvaro Domingo. Twentieth Century Fox 2000.
- *1492: Conquest of Paradise*. Dir. Ridley Scott. Prods. Mimi Polk Gitlin and Alain Goldman 1992

Readings for Spanish 370

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- Cerwin, H. (1963). *Bernal Diaz: History of the Conquest*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. ISBN: 968-160-509-8
- Chang-Rodriguez, R. (1988). *La apropiación del signo: tres cronistas indígenas de Perú*. Tempe: Arizona State University Press ISBN: 087-918-067-6
- Greer, M.R., Mignolo, W. & Quilligan, M. (2007). *Rereading the Black Legend: Discourses of religious and racial Difference in the Renaissance Empires*. Chicago: Chicago University Press ISBN: 978-022-630-721-3
- Guadarrama López, F. *Amanacer* Ra jyasu: Antología de poesía mazahua contemporánea*. Mexico: Editorial Praxis ISBN:970-682-010-8
- Leon-Portilla, M. (1994). *Quince poetas del mundo náhuatl*. Mexico: Editorial Diana. ISBN:968-13-2624-5
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