

Participatory Pedagogy: Oral History in the Service-Learning Classroom

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Abstract

This article seeks to demonstrate how using oral history in a service-learning course offers an opportunity for students, faculty, and community to engage in participatory pedagogy. Through oral history, students learn to listen, reflect, and see how their learning is achieved in connection with the community. As a pedagogical tool, oral history engenders knowledge production that highlights collaboration and expands students' understanding of equality and social justice, as Latin@ members of the community become active participants through their roles as narrators.

Keywords: service-learning, oral history, participatory pedagogy, Latino/a studies

Introduction

The steady growth of Latin@ communities across Midwestern states is urging us to make curricular and programmatic changes throughout K-16 education that include language learning and maintenance in real environments, with the documentation of Latin@ presence via oral histories, documentaries, and ethnographies as primary texts. Incorporating oral history in the service-learning classroom offers a path and an opportunity to close the gap between community and the university, and between producers of academic research and those who are impacted by it. In the process, this ensures that students experience learning not only within the walls of their classroom or in the comfort of their favorite study spot, but also through direct engagement with the community. This article examines a service-learning course in Spanish, "Spanish in Ohio," in which students learn about Latin@s in the United States, particularly those in Columbus, where the Ohio State University is located. This article includes two students' perspectives and demonstrates the potential of oral history as participatory pedagogy to allow students to see themselves and their Latin@ communities as agents of social change.

"Spanish in Ohio" is a required, advanced senior-level undergraduate course that was created in 1995 to provide an immersion experience for students for whom study abroad was not an option.

Class enrollment numbers 15–20 students each semester. Initially, and until fall semester 2015, students spent 100 hours in the community with the goal of using Spanish in real settings to learn from and contribute to the Latin@ community. The number of hours was reduced to 70 to ensure a more focused and sustainable learning environment for our students, one that allowed time for reflecting individually and as a class on the work and learning happening in the community. The course did not have a community partnership component, and it was not considered a service-learning course until 2011. Since then, the course, which is offered every semester, has established community partnerships with Latin@serving nonprofit organizations, government offices, schools, and churches. Students engage with the community in a variety of roles, such as mentors, tutors, ESL assistants, and interpreters. Most of the students take the class to fulfill their study abroad requirement for the Spanish major; however, over the past 2 years, several students have taken the class in addition to study abroad experiences because they see that understanding issues of concern to the local Latin@ community while using Spanish in nonacademic environments has direct relevance to their careers—nursing, social work, education, and so on. Although this is an undergraduate course, graduate students often enroll for the reasons stated above.

Using the concepts of border pedagogy and the cultural borderland (Anzaldúa, 1987; Giroux, 1988) and Freire's (2005) seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, as a theoretical framework for this essay, I have found that by using oral history in service-learning, students and I—as border crossers—have an opportunity to learn about social, language, institutional, and physical barriers often experienced by members of the Latin@ community. Anzaldúa tells us that “the Borderlands are present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (p. 19). Indeed, this pedagogical approach allows us to introduce multicultural education as students engage in the study of local Latin@ communities and Spanish language while focusing on issues of equality and social justice. For that reason, if we want our students to “go beyond their state of thinking” (Freire & Horton, 1990, p. 19), using oral history in the service-learning classroom offers a chance for participatory pedagogy—one that pushes us to listen, reflect, and see—like few other learning experiences can offer.

More specifically, participatory pedagogy is a teaching methodology that instills students' ownership of learning and invites

community members to become part of the educational process, not as objects of study, but as partners who teach us about their own lived experiences, so that our understanding of structural and systematic inequalities is never separate from those who are affected by them. Participatory pedagogy needs to be distinguished from community-based participatory research (CBPR), an action research methodology with roots attributable in part to social scientist Kurt Lewin. CBPR has primarily been positioned within the context of public health, social sciences, and education (*Wallerstein, N., & Duran, B., 2003*). Numerous terms exist for methodologies similar to CBPR: cooperative inquiry, participatory research, participatory action research, community-based research, action science, action inquiry, action research. None of these methodologies rely on discussing learning impact or methodology as community, student, and teacher participate in the learning process.

Participatory pedagogy presents an opportunity to engage the student and does not present a solution to a social problem. Participatory pedagogy allows the student to reflect on their own lived experiences in relation to others, providing them with enough context to have interpretive authority over their own learning which, I argue, is a sign of reciprocity. Research in service-learning has examined the many ways in which students achieve learning and how they are able to connect their learning through self-knowledge and personal experience (*Eyler, Giles, & Astin, 1999; Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997*). By using oral history as an integral part of the experience, community members become active participants in education through their roles as “narrators.” In the context examined in this article, oral history narrators provide us with first-person accounts of life as newcomers and long-standing community members, immigrants and migrants, their language use, and, ultimately, the complexity and diversity of *Latinidades*.

Understanding participatory pedagogy as the merging of oral history and service-learning methodologies enables us to incorporate academic learning, community, and reflection as integral to learning and to recognize that a partnership exists between teacher, student, and community. Students and instructor acknowledge and respect each other’s roles and recognize that we learn as we come together. Indeed, Paul Thompson (*1998*) tells us that “oral history . . . can break down barriers between teachers and students, between generations, between educational institutions and the world outside” (*p. 3*). Furthermore, our narrators are our “*narrative sources*” (*Portelli, 2006*); when working with the Latin@ population, especially when we talk about oral history in Spanish, we refer to these

narratives as *testimonios*. The Latin American concept of *testimonio* has served to challenge master narratives, denounce social injustices, and provide support for resistance. Garcia and Castro (2011) have described *testimonios* as “liberationist texts seen as a tool for those struggles and to further encourage them” (p. 19). Although I do not suggest that our narrators are engaging in this process, oral histories as *testimonios* give agency to narrators who tell the stories about their lives as they experience them. *Testimonios* are a powerful tool for self-representation for marginalized or under-represented communities, and they assign narrators the status of knowledge bearers, of sources that we can consult to understand more about the narrators’ lived experience. I also bring up the term because typically, when we talk to Latin American native speakers of Spanish about oral history (*historia oral*), their point of reference is *testimonios*.

Collecting oral history of often silenced or misrepresented voices in any community brings about ethical considerations, sensitivity, and understanding of the historical and cultural background of the narrator. For this reason, before students start working in the Latin@ community in Ohio, together we explore the heterogeneity of the Latin@ experience through discussions of language, immigration status, class, race, and gender. We pay particular attention to terms such as *Latino* versus *Hispanic*, *illegal* versus *undocumented*, and, this semester in particular, DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals). Discussing these terms involves acknowledging that the process of immigration is often an unfair system that rarely allows people from Latin American regions a reasonable path to permanent residency. Because the term *illegal* connotes criminality, it removes any kind of human value. Preference is given to the term *undocumented* because it restores dignity and humanity to the individual. Students are invited to wrestle with these terms, to grapple with their own biases, and to witness how some of these identities are embodied by those they will eventually work with in the community.

We also discuss service-learning as learning that occurs in partnerships with the community, not as charity work or good deeds, and through the writing of weekly short reflective essays, students begin to see Latin@ people as part of their own community, and to question and challenge misconceptions and systems that create language barriers and unequal access to health care and education. In doing so, we enter into Freire’s (1970) concept of conscientization, in which we are being transformed but also become agents of change who can push for social action. Anzaldúa (1987)

explains the concept of conscientization; as she becomes aware of her own identity formation, she says,

Every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a *travesía*, a crossing. . . . Knowing makes me more aware, it makes me more conscious. “Knowing” is painful because after “it” happens I can’t stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before. (p. 70)

Although I am not suggesting that students’ own identities are being changed, I do argue that by *knowing*, in community, they participate in the process of transformation and, as Freire (1970) would say, “critical intervention in reality” (p. 81).

I started an oral history project about Latin@s in Ohio (ONLO) in 2014. The project was born out of the necessity to have authentic voices and experiences informing students’ understanding before they began their work in the community. IRB clearance was issued for the first 2 years of this project. However, starting in 2017, IRB authorization was no longer required. Each oral history participant signs a consent form so that their story is collected and archived in the Center for Folklore Studies digital collections at the Ohio State University. Histories collected for this project resulted in an iBook publication titled *Latin@ Stories Across Ohio* (Foulis, 2015), which students now use as one of their class texts. Collecting oral histories by interviewing Latin@s across the state is now an option for students in the service-learning course, which has evolved so that students are actively engaged in every step of the process. Students and I research the area we would like to visit, follow leads from previous participants, identify the people for the project, make contact via phone or e-mail to explain the opportunity to document their story, and plan the trip there. Students are also asked to send reminders, make follow-up calls, and send thank-yous after the interview is conducted. Since community members are an integral component of the project, they choose their preferred time and location for the interview, and they are given freedom to craft their own history. They also approve the final version of their video-narrative.

Undoubtedly, training students in oral history interviewing techniques is a step outside the framework of the class. However, when students Adriana Ponce De Leon and Kelly DiLullo started working with me, they had already learned about the demographics of this community in the state; they knew about key terminology

and issues of immigration, language, and visibility; and they had listened to and read the stories in our class textbook. Conducting interviews, however, was a new experience for them. They knew what oral history sounded like, but they had never conducted interviews. We began by interviewing each other and offering feedback on asking questions and listening for key information so we could ask our participant to elaborate about a particular experience. All this was performed in Spanish. Although students in this class are advanced Spanish majors and some, like Ponce De Leon, are heritage speakers of Spanish, interviewing is a skill that requires more practice if one conducts the interview in the developing language.

DiLullo was a double major, studying Spanish and speech pathology. Although she was now in her senior year, she had had very little exposure to Spanish outside academic settings. Nervous and excited about the opportunity to work with native speakers, she took a look at the places where she could begin her work. DiLullo decided to get involved in the oral history project and work as greeter at a mobile medical clinic that works with Latin@ patients. In this course, the first few weeks of the semester are spent in the classroom. She read about immigration and U.S. Latin@ history, with a specific focus on Latin@s in Ohio. DiLullo comments,

In reading about the historical, economic, cultural, and societal impact that Latin@ immigrants have had since the United States' inception, and about the legislation and historical events that have affected Latin@s in the United States before having contact with the Latin@ community in Columbus, I was able to gain an educated and honest perspective about what this community has experienced historically as a people living in this country.

DiLullo believes that her involvement in this class has given her insight about a population that is culturally and linguistically different from her own. However, DiLullo's work collecting oral history seems to have had the greatest learning impact, because it allowed her to learn new skills and, as she notes, "I quickly discovered that as teacher and student, we were collaborators on this project. It was not simply a teacher teaching and the student observing and taking notes—a contrast compared to my usual academic experience." DiLullo quickly began to contact potential narrators for the project in southern Ohio, in a county we had not visited before. She called participants, explained the project, and

requested appointments for interviews, all using Spanish. Initially, students observed the process and took pictures and notes. DiLullo says,

While Dr. Foulis conducted interviews, my classmate, Adriana Ponce de Leon, and I would take pictures that show the narrators' spaces and personal items or artifacts to supplement the content of the interview, as well as make sure all technology was functioning properly. Additionally, Adriana and I had the opportunity to witness first-hand the impact that connecting with an immigrant in their own language has on their ability to express themselves freely and honestly. I believe that the effort to interview participants for ONLO in their native language demonstrates that we value their narratives not solely as immigrants, but as Latin@s.

Collecting oral history in a service-learning classroom was a new experience for her, as was the pedagogical approach of the service-learning class itself. Coursework and in-class discussion provided DiLullo and Ponce De Leon with enough knowledge to understand the community we were trying to reach. At this point, we had already begun to read and listen to a few oral history interviews in the classroom to understand the value of the personal story. Using narrators of oral history as one of our main texts helped the students become comfortable with the community they were about to enter. As DiLullo explains:

Shortly after our first few interviews working together, Dr. Foulis asked that my classmate and I begin conducting interviews in Spanish with Latin@s for the project. In English, this type of work would not have intimidated me in the slightest, but in Spanish it was certainly more of a challenge, and required me to attain more fluency and comfort in the language. As a group, we practiced interviewing skills in Spanish, and strategies for keying in on important information and asking participants to clarify and expand on a topic. When I conducted my first interview, I felt prepared [for] the experience. I interviewed a fellow peer at The Ohio State University who was Latino and a heritage speaker of Spanish. The opportunity to interview him and talk about his Latino identity and experiences in Spanish allowed for a more personal connection between inter-

viewer and narrator, and an avenue for me to empathize with Latin@s in the United States more strongly than through the pages of a history book.

While both DiLullo and Ponce De Leon continued to practice Spanish and learn interviewing techniques, and as they engaged in other activities such as making phone calls in the target language, DiLullo also learned that storytelling is a useful tool to connect with and understand a community different from her own. Furthermore, she demonstrates a deeper understanding of the Latin@ community as a heterogeneous group as she acknowledges

discovering that every immigration or Latin@ story is different from another, and cannot be generalized. As someone who has never immigrated to another country, my understanding of the process and experience before this project was that people who cross our border are sometimes let in, sometimes deported, face many vague or general hardships here, and try to find better opportunities in the United States for themselves and their families. My understanding was shattered and made new after listening, through interviews, to the reasons why Latin@s were leaving their homes for a foreign land, to the hardships that they faced due to language barriers and cultural intolerance, to the trials and triumphs of their immigration and career stories, to the ways they found love and maintained their Latin@ culture in the United States, and to the heartfelt and honest advice that they gave new Latin@ immigrants. I truly am grateful for having such a unique and hands-on cultural experience during the last year of my undergraduate education.

The decision to have students conduct interviews themselves was born organically, as students asked to conduct interviews and I saw their participation as an integral part of their learning process. I observed that they often incorporated examples from the oral histories they were listening to into their discussions, thereby illustrating how matters such as language and identity might be experienced by members of different age groups, and it was evident that they understood the value of oral history. I also knew that their speaking abilities in Spanish would improve much more if they conducted the interviews themselves. The training and teaching

continued throughout our travel to the participants' chosen interview location, and during the interview as the students divided the work of interviewing and taking notes. Our discussions about the interview experience and the stories we collected provided another opportunity to learn together and reflect on that knowledge. For example, after interviewing two restaurant owners in a rural community in southeast Ohio, we talked about how each narrator expressed never experiencing discrimination of any kind. The students and I then wondered if this was due to their race—these participants were light-skinned Latinos—or if they omitted telling us some of their experiences of hardship precisely because they were business owners and these stories are public. Later on, we were able to compare these initial oral histories with another from a female business owner of a restaurant, bakery, and a small Mexican grocery store, at a much larger city. This woman has been an advocate and activist for undocumented immigrants and talked to us about instances of discrimination toward the Latin@ community by a local sheriff.

Students' interest and desire to take ownership of the project was evident as they began expressing ownership of the project. They began to use words such as "our" project and began volunteering to conduct the next interview themselves. They thus achieved complete awareness of self through knowledge. Freire (2005) describes this as a dialogic practice in which "through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (p. 80). By bringing together oral history in service-learning, the dialogue includes the community's perspective, and first-person accounts never escape the consciousness of the interviewers.

Using oral history in the service-learning classroom makes this reciprocal exchange possible in different and tangible ways. Students and narrators are essential partners in community-based learning, and it is here that trust, reciprocity, and mutual respect play crucial roles in the success of students and community engagement programs. More than completing a task, students and narrators move in and out of their role of subject and object where the line is so blurry that it allows a type of kinship to develop: Narrators share their life history as they have experienced it, and students practice their interviewing and language abilities *en convivencia*,

as these interviews are often conducted in homes or quiet places. Michael Frisch (1990) calls this exchange a “shared authority” in which “the interpretive and meaning making process is shared by definition—it is inherent in the dialogic nature of an interview” (p. 127).

Many of the outcomes of using oral history in the classroom directly relate to two specific experiences that instructors hope their students will achieve in the service-learning classroom. (1) They expect students to interact with people in the community, including people in the community who are invited into the classroom. This is also achieved as students listen to the narrators’ video-recorded narratives. In the class “Spanish in Ohio,” this accomplishes two goals: Students learn about the community, and they continue to practice Spanish since most of the interviews are in this language. (2) Students are also expected to develop a final product that will become an important resource for the community and, in some cases, for the state, the country, and even the world (Wood, 2001). The first learning outcome occurs while we are out in the community collecting stories and as we invite the narrators to share their knowledge and life experience. Before or after the interview is conducted, our narrators show appreciation for the work we are doing and encourage us to continue collecting stories that preserve the Latin@ history and heritage in the state. The second learning outcome happens as students learn to edit the videos of these interviews. As they are choosing pictures, transitions, titles, and credits and writing summaries, I remind students about the value of carefully curating and producing the best final product not only to honor the participant, but also to provide a resource to the community that can be a source of pride. Broadly speaking, we collect their knowledge, learn from it, and digitally share it to the world. In essence, together we created an important resource for the community.

For example, there have been three public exhibits of these stories, and I have presented this work at other universities and conferences where, often, Latin@ audiences speak of the value of hearing the personal story. Furthermore, the narrators are thankful for being able to tell their story, or for finally having a record of their older family members’ stories. They also acknowledge the time we are investing traveling and seeing each story to completion, and compliment students on their Spanish-speaking skills. Ponce De Leon, as a student collaborator in this project, states, “Stories were an essential part of my childhood growing up, but I could have never imagined that listening to and documenting stories would

become an essential part of my experience in higher education.” As a heritage speaker of Spanish and Latina, Ponce De Leon brought her own perspective and lived experiences into the project. At the same time, it gave her a new understanding about her own identity in relation to other members of the Latin@ community. Her work documenting Latin@ history, and as a contributor, uncovers the lack of Latin@ voices in higher education, that is, as legitimate and valuable sources of knowledge.

Initially, Ponce De Leon expected to work as an interpreter in local schools or within a medical setting; however, when she learned more about the oral history project and the opportunity to work alongside her classmate and the professor, she decided to complete all her hours on this project. She was new to service-learning pedagogy and oral history, but as she persisted throughout the semester, she began to verbalize the impact of this experience. She explains,

At the beginning of the semester when I thought of “service-learning”, the word “volunteer” came to mind. However, my experience through my involvement in this class, taught me that by learning in the community we establish a partnership. After a semester of interacting with the Latin@ community, I learned more from them than I ever could have possibly given. It is a humbling experience, inserting oneself into new and unfamiliar territory, however with an open-mind, service-learning opportunities can be life changing. I believe the shift from volunteering to serving was rooted from the opportunity for me to take ownership of the ONLO project.

Ponce De Leon believes that sharing the responsibility for this project, along with her classmate and professor, was key to her community-engaged learning experience. As she learned to understand the difference between being a volunteer and working in partnership, her perspective on who has decision-making power and knowledge also changed. While relying on the professor to answer questions when unsure about a procedure, Spanish language use, or feedback about follow-up questions during interviews, she began to understand that this was a collaborative process. For her, the chance to conduct interviews “felt like as though my engagement in the course was having a real effect on myself and the community. By allowing us to take ownership of our service with oral history,

Dr. Foulis paved the way for the transformation from volunteer to service-learner.”

As it is typically in this class, even with heritage speakers of Spanish, students’ main concern is their level of conversational Spanish. However, most students—regardless of whether they end up completing their service hours—realize that their language level is just one component of their service in the community. Ponce De Leon reflects,

many of the Latin@s that were interviewed as a part of ONLO were excited to simply have someone sit and listen to their story. Nowadays, our world is so fast paced that we rarely take the time to listen. This creates a disconnect between ourselves and other populations. Oftentimes, having to sit down and listen to a person seems like a burden, but I can genuinely say that as a result of this simple act, my perspective has been significantly altered. Prior to this semester, documenting stories was not relevant to my life, but I have learned that “oral history” is a form of storytelling and everyone has partaken in this pure tradition. As a result of ONLO, I now welcome the opportunity to sit down with a person and hear their story, because there is always something to learn from others.

Indeed, students in this project and in this class learn how to build community with people different from themselves. Although DiLullo and Ponce De Leon speak specifically about their collaboration with the ONLO project, students in this service-learning course often arrive at a similar conclusion; they overcome their fear of using Spanish with native speakers; moreover, they have a more complete understanding of the experiences, lives, and concerns of the Latin@ community in Ohio.

Lastly, Ponce De Leon’s participation added a new dimension to our collaborative process of collecting oral history. Her perspective as a Latina herself, and a heritage speaker of Spanish, allowed her to connect with our narrators as a cultural insider, yet also as one willing to learn new viewpoints. It also allowed her to use her Spanish in relational ways with her own community, and it made her see participation in the project as an extension of her own heritage, a presence that is worth documenting and preserving. Indeed, she also gifted the project with her own oral history and identified another peer whose story she recorded. The ONLO project often

requires that we travel outside campus, which allows professor and students to continue learning about each other or class topics on the road. Students who have collaborated in the past have indicated that they enjoy the time on the road where they can continue to ask questions and develop a more in-depth mentoring and professional relationship with the professor, in contrast to a more typical student situation that limits these experiences to time spent in the classroom and the occasional office visit. Ponce De Leon valued this time on the road and documenting Latin@ life as “the most authentic and vulnerable way to learn about others and create a lasting connection.” In her final reflection about her work on collecting oral history in the service-learning classroom, she writes,

Over the course of the semester, I have developed an appreciation for the art of narration and the value of stories. Documenting stories [is] an essential way of ensuring that the stories live on after we are no longer here to tell them. Although I am a Latina myself, through this course, I learned that my community is not homogeneous. I listened to experiences both similar but also infinitely different from my own, proving that there is no single story, nor one definition of the Latin@ identity. Latin@s come from various countries, different languages, have diverse physical appearances, distinctive customs and traditions, etc. Collecting stories from Latin@s in my community has also personally provided me with the space to continue forming my own identity.

Although I am infinitely grateful for my own family’s stories, I have a strong desire to keep collecting new narratives and continue learning from others. This class was only one semester, yet I intend to continue my work in this project in the future. I can confidently say that I have experienced significant personal growth as a result of this class. By working and interacting with the community, I created a bond and connection with a person we interviewed. It has been a privilege being invited to listen to Latin@s’ stories and to have the opportunity to learn from some of their most vulnerable, but also most memorable moments. The world needs to hear these stories and narrators enrich our national history by sharing their experiences.

Undoubtedly, the sustainability of using oral history in the service-learning classroom is limited by students' language abilities, schedules, and willingness to learn new technologies. It is also limited to the number of community members interested in gifting their stories to the project in any given semester. There is also a limit to the professor's time. Working on this type of project requires close student supervision and traveling throughout the state. Finally, the number of Latin@s in the state of Ohio is also relatively low, which enables only two or three students to work with the professor to plan, collect narratives, and edit videos. However, since students are given several choices to complete their service hours, lack of a large Latin@ population has not presented a problem. When we allow students to critically reflect on their participation and their learning goals, and when they recognize the mutual exchange of teaching and learning in the community, students are transformed.

The practice of service-learning provides students and faculty with the opportunity to see the community as a resource and partner in the learning and teaching process. As this course illustrates, students are brought to use Spanish in the real world, with people from different nationalities, including those members of the Latin@ community who have lived in the United States for multiple generations. It offers a point of inquiry into lived experiences, especially when we use oral history as a tool for collecting primary sources. Furthermore, when we reflect on those encounters and experiences—and value them as a crucial part of learning—we engage in participatory pedagogy where the community, faculty, and students acknowledge each other by listening, seeing, and reflecting on that encounter. Community engagement through oral history pushes us to consider the value of participatory pedagogy as a practice that offers students the opportunity to develop empathy and appreciation of different languages and cultures, and, equally important, it allows them to see how distinct *Latinidades* thrive in the United States today.

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