Dialoguing the Latina Experience in Higher Education

XAÉ ALICIA REYES
DIANA I. RÍOS

Abstract: In this article, the authors discuss experiences and processes in their professional development as Latina academics. They frame their dialogue chronologically around the following themes: family background, graduate school, experiences with colleagues, participation in academia, interactions with students, and situations that inspire and motivate. By sharing their perspectives on issues linked to their status as women of color, the authors construct meaning and identify potential strategies for recruitment and success of minority students and academics.

Resumen: En este artículo discutimos experiencias y procesos de desarrollo profesional como mujeres de origen hispano en el ámbito académico universitario de los EE.UU. Nuestro diálogo se construye cronológicamente conforme a los siguientes temas; el entorno familiar, los estudios de postgrado, experiencias con los colegas y nuestra participación en el ámbito académico, las interacciones con nuestros alumnos, y las situaciones que nos inspiran y nos motivan. Al compartir nuestras perspectivas vinculadas a nuestra identidad como mujeres de minorías étnicas, damos sentido a identificamos posibles estrategias para el reclutamiento y el éxito de los estudiantes y académicos de grupos minoritarios.

Keywords: Latina; higher education; faculty success; recruitment

The experience of Latino students in higher education is an important concern for all conscientious academics who seek to understand the reasons for the underrepresentation of minority individuals in politics and in high-ranking administrative positions in business. And at the core of this, we continue to have a scarcity of teachers of color and high attrition rates among minority students. Oftentimes students are pushed out or alienated in schools by way of linguistic codes and norms that appear to be incongruent with the patterns expected by the dominant culture (X. A. Reyes, 2003b). The focus on Latino presence and underrepresentation in academia was the subject of M. Reyes and Halcón’s (1988) seminal piece, “Racism in Acade-
mia: The Old Wolf Revisited,” in Harvard Educational Review. Subsequently, others have taken to task the experiences encountered by Latinos in academic settings while completing graduate work and all the way through securing academic positions and dealing with negotiating evaluation and tenure processes (Medina & Luna, 2000; Verdugo, 1995). The scholarly articles include statistical data and some anecdotal accounts that document the struggles and difficulties that continue to exclude Latinos and/or hamper their tenure possibilities.

In this article, using the dialogic method (Freire, 1970), we will reconstruct dialogues from moments and episodes that we consider powerfully illustrative of the dynamics that affect Latinos in higher education settings. Both of us as Latinas, one a Puerto Rican and the other a Chicana (Mexican American) woman, have shared similar experiences. The reflection and analysis in this article should hopefully provide Latina and Latino scholars, other faculty of color, and allies in the academy with thought-provoking insights that can be used in effective curriculum development, program implementation, and academic strategic planning. Consideration of autobiographical experiences, coupled with careful analysis of policy making regarding Latino individuals, needs to be cultivated in higher education. Consequently, Latino individuals may be successfully retained and promoted as students, faculty members, and administrators.

Experiences are documented through our own professional archives of university students’ journal entries, response papers, and written comments on course evaluations. In addition, we draw from our personal memos, news clippings, and professional and personal communications. We begin the chronology in our dialogue with some of our encounters in graduate school, followed by experiences with students’ and colleagues’ clippings and diaries. All experiences are tempered with grounded reflections, that is reflections that include the analysis of the moment at the moment and a more distanced analysis of moments, episodes, and encounters. Through this dialogue, we hope to give voice to a silenced discourse that is often concealed for fear of appearing weak, confrontational, self-pitying, or unscholarly or for fear of numerous other labels that restrain Latina academics and others from discussing issues that need to be examined. We also include here compelling responses or interactions that we have received from students, staff, and colleagues that validate and inspire us to stay the course. We have gained fuel from our supporters, and it allows us to continue to challenge barriers and struggle for representation. In challenging, we are aware that we model a behavior of discerned persistence. We frame the dialogue by sharing brief versions of our biographies as they pertain to educational opportunities, achievements, and aspirations. We then proceed with dialogues related to graduate school experiences, experiences with colleagues, and dialogues and responses to our students.
**Prelude to Higher Education**

As stated earlier, our biographies are shared to inform the reader of the elements that shaped our perspectives about education. The experiences we have lived are reflections of experiences lived by many people of color. Perhaps they will shed light on significant events that strengthened our resolve to move beyond the stereotypes held by many of those who should have encouraged us.

**Xae’s Educational Autobiography**

In my family, education was always emphasized as the marker of becoming someone to be respected and someone who could have better opportunities in life. Neither of my parents was able to attend college, although they both had wanted to. All of my father’s siblings completed degrees while he attended to the family’s needs by joining the U.S. Army. My mother completed an associate degree in secretarial science during the time I attended eighth and ninth grades. My father may have encouraged this because of his impending Vietnam tour at the time. She completed the program, but her only practice of her skills came through typing papers for my sister and me while we were in high school. My mother’s skills as a seamstress and her thriftiness allowed us to survive on one income. I don’t remember any school personnel in my public high schools in Puerto Rico ever encouraging me to get a degree. Three earlier years in Catholic schools presented college attendance as the norm, especially in the United States and among the wealthier students. The potential to attend college was not emphasized as much in the public school where I finished high school, but it was the only plan our parents continued to nurture. Somehow this got me to the main public university in Puerto Rico, where I continued through a master’s degree.

My first understandings of academic environments were constructed in a very traditionally Spanish-influenced setting. The university I attended in Puerto Rico presented me, in moving through its system, with two major forces beyond academic excellence: politics and genetics. If you had *palas* (connections) to the party in power, you could find opportunities. If you had the *apellidos* (surnames) of people who were entrenched in the system, you could secure (inherit) access to positions. This latter strategy was the most pervasive, but nepotism never appeared to be an obstacle to move into the academic setting. As a student there, I knew which of my classmates were related to someone on the faculty, as my professors would often mention this in class. I also learned of the lab school (*la modelo*) that was nearby and attended by most faculty offspring. This university was like home to them. Later, I would find that one professor was the son, daughter, or nephew of or had some other familial tie to a faculty member, the dean, or another administrator. My background included none of these equations, and I relied solely
on my academic skills, people skills, and bilingualism (attributed to my Army “brat” experiences, strong parenting from my mother, and dictums from my father).

I stood out in English and eventually shifted from an undergraduate degree in social sciences as an economics major to a rigorous master’s degree in translation. My first experiences in teaching at the college level began here. I eventually worked as a translator, and fate (marriage) brought me back to teaching in U.S. universities as an adjunct, and through soft money positions in Puerto Rico for years before pursuing a Ph.D. in the United States. I broke with tradition by relocating to the United States with my two sons, then 7 and 16, for a period of 2 years as I completed all of my course work in the Southwest. These choices presented added challenges within the framework of the behaviors expected of women in my culture, regardless of educational circumstances.

**Diana’s Educational Autobiography**

Uneven opportunities and life circumstances made education a distant but possible goal for my predecessors. In México and in the United States, family members were and are more likely to pursue private business ventures than scholarly endeavors. I owe a great deal to my strict paternal grandmother who envisioned different avenues for her offspring that could only be achieved through higher education. Her oldest son, my father, became a high school teacher, activist, and professor. He did all this despite heavy anti-Mexican sentiment in the Southwest United States.

I grew up in a mixed working and professional class family with consistent parents who both loved books. My mother, typical of U.S. women of her generation, did not attend higher education. As the oldest sibling in her family, she dropped out of school to help support her family by waitressing and performing other difficult service jobs. As a married woman she worked at home managing the household, five children, and a periodic stray relative who needed our assistance, and she took on some part-time jobs when the household budget was overstrained.

We as children were never told overtly that we were to attend higher education or even that we needed to achieve high grades to prepare ourselves for higher education. I grew up with an unspoken law of high achievement and even grew up with the too-elusive performance goal called perfection. I attended several Catholic elementary schools as we moved around the Southwest, with summers in Guadalajara, to fulfill my father’s education goals. Fortunately I attended only one public junior high school and one high school. My parents chose our high school carefully and found that a number of the faculty were University of California–Berkeley graduates. My siblings and I became students in Contra Costa County’s so-called racial integration program (RIP) effort. This was one of the RIPs in the San Francisco East Bay that sought to integrate White, affluent, suburban schools.
Though I felt that certain White suburban students were capable of killing me, I had access to honors courses and dedicated teachers. I tried to concentrate on my work and made positive contributions to ethnic or international themed school clubs (German Club, Asian Club, Spanish Club, Model UN, American Field Service). But no one could ignore the ethnic and racial conflicts that were being brought about by changes in California demographics and by the ethnic/racial makeup of my high school.

Populations of color were growing and were considered a threat. I was very aware that I was considered to be a representative of that threat to White homogeneity. The culture in the honors courses demanded high achievement and successful entrance to a top university on graduation. As one of the few students of color in my high school honors courses and the only Latina student in my cohort, I was isolated. I wondered how higher education entrance was possible for someone like me. I had only seen my father do it, and it was not easy. When I gained entrance to the University of California–Berkeley and later to other top nationally ranked universities, I cried with joy. I later gained a master’s degree from the University of Michigan and a doctorate from the University of Texas–Austin. Being away from all my family in California was liberating but emotionally difficult. My four brothers had similar routes, though I was the only one who gained a doctorate and am the only one residing permanently outside the home state. I have faced numerous challenges and embraced many successes at all levels.

**Dialoguing About Graduate School**

Getting through high school is still a challenge for many Latino youngsters. Statistics reported by the media constantly highlight their high attrition rates and continue to reinforce low expectations among their teachers and the mainstream community in general. Perhaps a stronger effort highlighting achievements is needed to create a variety of expectations among educators and the general public. Moving beyond an undergraduate degree is an accomplishment, however this also increases the pressures faced by students of color in graduate school environments.

**Xaé**

Three themes come to mind as I remember my experiences: (a) low expectations, (b) nurturing of codependency and overreliance on mentors, mostly the overextended Latino faculty, and (c) isolation from mainstream students. Not knowing the culture of the environment can be part of a more generic experience as first generation college students. In graduate school, the challenge intensifies, for if the students are scarce at the undergraduate level, they are even fewer at the graduate level. The discourses of other Latinos are filled with commentary on the numbers who had to leave or could not take the pressure of being different and expected not to do well. There
was a notion that we had to be walked through things and guided to the point of picking out courses and determining our course load. I got my share of “You need this course,” or “This course can’t be done without that other one.” But I was older and somewhat stubborn and more than anything driven and determined to complete my doctoral program in a preset amount of time. Thus, I missed out on the mainstream agenda of getting published and networking before completing a dissertation. This in spite of the fact that I collaborated on data collection and analysis on one project that I saw published later as an article with no mention of my assistance in the project. My commitment to never repeating this behavior with my own students is tempered by my understanding that Latino and other minority faculty are expected to mentor Latino and minority students while they themselves are struggling with publish or perish situations. The isolation from mainstream students resulted from curricular designs that separated students unintentionally and from an underlying resentment among peers (and even some faculty) over funding targeted for minority students. In this case, the fellowship I received was critical for my potential to pursue doctoral studies, but I also knew that a graduate assistantship would have covered or provided a tuition waiver.

This second modality of funding, as well as research assistantships, was held by most mainstream students in the department who viewed beneficiaries of the fellowship as privileged. In my case, with two dependents, I sought out a teaching assistantship in the Spanish department to supplement a fellowship stipend that only covered the rent to my family housing apartment.

In my second year I was offered a part-time teaching assistantship in the foundations strand of the education program and a part-time research assistantship with an anthropologist who headed, among other things, a migrant student program. This latter work informed my choice of dissertation topic. Reflecting on this, I see a pattern that repeats itself in higher education where funding sources and programs continue to separate populations.

Diana

There are many realizations you have as a graduate student. One of them is that that the Chicano and Latino faculty are trying their best to mentor Chicano and Latino bachelor’s, master’s, and doctorate students in addition to mentoring the other students. But they themselves need support from above and below to gain tenure and thus job security. I recall that many faculty members did not have the luxury of putting another name on an article that they were sending off to a top journal. They needed to be sole authors to be taken more seriously by their colleagues. What I experienced was that it was not common for graduate students of any color to be coauthors with faculty as a result of authorship pressures, though many graduate students were employed as long-term research assistants. I think back on the Chicano and Latino faculty and other faculty of color at my graduate institutions and I
know they all must have been made of steel to have been successful despite the huge demands placed on them. It has taken a few generations of Chicano and Latino doctorates to establish a tier of tenured faculty at various colleges and universities across the country who have the job security that in turn enables them to challenge old structures and make new ones.

Still, many institutions of higher education do not have the critical mass of faculty of color that can lead in recruitment, mentoring, curriculum development, and campus governance. You would think that tenured faculty of color would be plentiful in the beginning of the 21st century, but that is not the case. I am glad that many institutions woke up and smelled the enchilada and arroz con pollo as well as the other manifestations of diversity after the last U.S. Census enumeration.

In my years in graduate school, I was exposed to a variety of expectations. Of course I disliked very much the expectations that were low or non-existent. Those last two types of expectations I did not foresee, and so they were painfully sharp when they surfaced. I was extremely delighted to see faculty, staff, or peers with low expectations of women of color overwhelmed by my high achievements and abilities. Naturally I felt validated, encouraged, and supported when faculty and peers assumed high abilities and achievements.

Dialoguing About Experiences With Colleagues and Negotiating Participation in Academia

In view of the low numbers of Latina scholars and of other academics of color in colleges and universities, there are interactions that point to an exoticism that envelopes our presence once we enter the academic arena. This reaction to our participation is to be expected because it reflects the patterns of broader society where roles have been ascribed to people based on customs and assumptions about their qualifications. In an academic setting, some of us have higher expectations and are often disappointed to see such behaviors in our more educated and our counterparts.

Xaë

On completing my degree, I sought to interview for a position on one college campus and was included in the applicant pool for three openings. I was called to interview for all three. I accepted the offer for the very first position I applied for and remember 16 people in attendance to the presentation of my research and another 5 colleagues who sat thorough a class I was to teach. Fresh out of my dissertation defense, I was comfortable and relaxed. My next two interviews occurred 5 years later, and I was to decide between two positions, one at the flagship campus of a large land-grant system and the other at a smaller campus of another. Again, a large number of colleagues attended my presentations, and the smaller of the two institutions
had me teach a class. I opted for the institution that appeared to value my action research agenda.

Collegiality, curiosity, and underestimation are some of the words that cross my mind during the turnouts for my lectures, only because I have seen these behaviors described in the research indicating that faculty of color are a bigger draw in recruitment processes than are mainstream faculty: “Chicano candidates drew a large number of faculty spectators to their interviews, while non-minority applicants went virtually unnoticed—even in the departments to which they had applied” (M. Reyes & Halcón, 1988, p. 426). My positive side tries to view this as healthy curiosity that I must embrace to make a point or two and provide insider perspectives on education as they affect Latino students.

What is considered scholarship is and has been a point of debate in my experience in the field of teacher preparation. For me, service to the broader community and mentoring are inseparable from my professional role as an educator. I feel that this is of extreme importance in the education of teachers and in community activism. But I have had discussions about this with peers in other disciplines who have cautioned me about dangers in merging my research and advocacy agenda. In a sense, I am hearing that advocacy and community involvement are personal goals that are separate and distant from scholarship as it is conceptualized by academia, especially in research institutions. The pressure is on to pursue the funding that will legitimize my research and mentoring activities before my involvement. This seems counterintuitive to me in view of the immediate needs of our communities.

Diana

Regarding interviewing for positions, I believe there are various kinds. There are the interviews that you attend because you read job announcements and they sound interesting. There are interviews that you are asked or begged to attend though you feel ambivalent. Finally, there are the kinds that are merely get acquainted visits that do not fit neatly in either category. Most faculty of color are very likely to experience the get acquainted type of interviews because universities and colleges raid their friends and neighbors to access small pools of faculty of color. I will unmask the get acquainted experiences because the dynamics are unpredictable. I visited two campuses to simply get acquainted. I already had a job and was ambivalent about the invitations. The first one, I found out later, was made possible by a high-level administrator of color of a large southern university. He was doing his job and had been pushing faculty of various departments to look at faculty of color. Unfortunately, the homogeneous White faculty of the department who invited me had no interest nor desire whatsoever in me as a hire. That visit was a waste of time and energy for me, to put it mildly. I had never been treated so poorly as a potential job candidate. There was little collegiality. A second get acquainted visit on the East Coast was very different. I was very
clear to ask if the faculty were honestly interested, and they assured me that they were. I did not relocate to that campus, but today I can say that I had a good visit to that university. They treated me with collegiality, interest, and respect.

To the question, “What is scholarship?” of course I have a traditional answer that is the appropriate response from a scholar in the liberal arts and sciences, but let me say something that we do not voice enough. I believe that part of scholarship entails a commitment to the local and larger community. This means that as scholars, we consider our roles in uplifting the community and not simply uplifting ourselves. We have a commitment outside as well as inside the academy. Inside, part of scholarship is encouraging, advising, and assisting students. And for many students of color, we faculty of color are all they have as role models of academic success. Different facets of scholarship that need attention place tolls on faculty of color because our communities and our people need for us to succeed and effectively help them in the process. We have a tall order to fill in life. Though many scholar-educators across the fields may not overtly state to others their moral and ethical responsibilities to their communities, I see many practicing this. Still, more can follow.

**Dialoguing With and Responding to Our Students**

In many if not most cases, the population to teach is predominantly mainstream. This creates both challenges and opportunities. On one hand, we may be the first educators of color they have confronted in their lifetime, and because of that we are under pressure to establish an image that may be extended to all other academics of color, to our ethnic or racial group, and to the greater Latino community. Although as educators we encourage students to think critically and to refrain from this grouping mentality, to use a cliché, old habits are hard to break, and until there is more diversity among educators at all levels, this is a major challenge for students. On the other hand, we are in a position to shatter stereotypes and create a shift in a historical perspective that has omitted our voices, and this is an exciting albeit daunting task.

**Xaé**

Early encounters in college classrooms in the United States were for me informative and character building. At first, as I navigated through foreign language departments teaching Spanish to either support myself or to put myself through school, my being Puerto Rican was often an issue because there were colleagues and students who had heard that Puerto Ricans did not speak correct Spanish (see X. A. Reyes, 2002). I often had to take time to explain the history of language in Puerto Rico and clarify that just as there is standard English, there is standard Spanish and that Spanish varies accord-
ing to geographic regions just as English does within the United States. After completing my doctorate, situating myself outside of the expected terrain of language teaching, I had other struggles to face in teacher education.

My first emotional tug came when on my first day in an undergraduate education course, a student raised her hand and asked if it was my first time teaching at a university. I felt my knees weaken but seized my father’s humor genes and replied:

Gee, do I really look that young? Thank you for the compliment, but I am sorry to disappoint you. I’ve taught at six other universities before coming here, two in upstate New York, two in the Southwest, and two in Puerto Rico.

Other painful encounters surfaced in student journals. One of the most important papers I require in my courses is an educational autobiography where I ask about their beliefs related to schooling, social issues, and “others” they have or have not interacted with in their lives. One poignant statement made by a White female student was truly hurtful. She stated, “I don’t know if I can stay in this class. I can’t learn from a person of color. I was taught that they aren’t smart. I was taught that they are lazy.” After taking a deep breath and wiping a tear, I wrote feedback on the margin of her paper encouraging her to research where her parents had informed their views and to consider whether they had informed their perspectives from any research or personal experiences. She stayed in class, and we often had written dialogues on a variety of issues. Her growth and informed perspectives were promising. In other instances, once in a while I had a Latina student in class and got feedback along these lines:

I am definitely glad I took this course, it has given me more reasons to be proud of being a Hispanic woman. (W.C., Latina student)

The nature of the courses taught and the maturity levels and experiences of students affect the feedback, evaluations, and responses to my teaching in a variety of ways. More mature and experienced students and those from working class backgrounds are more positive in their responses to my teaching style, which involves dialogues on difficult topics such as racism, classism, and other isms. Traditionally, many colleagues base discussions on readings and require less intense critical reflection because they involve value judgments that often reveal the baggage of interlocutors. I find these dialogues and written responses critical pieces for developing equitable and caring educators.

I embrace the opportunities for dialogue in my work and in my office hours, although these dialogues are intense and time consuming. They inform my practices and contribute to my growth and to that of my students. Dissertation topics, conference presentations, and teaching approaches have
been enhanced by these dialogues. I include interviews of teachers in the field and participant observations that include communities outside of the classroom (X. A. Reyes, 2003a). These topics are critical for courses I teach related to language policy and practices, qualitative research methods, and action research among Latino students. Reflection on these experiences is crucial for providing reliable information needed to shatter stereotypes about us (X. A. Reyes & Ríos, 2003a, 2003b).

Diana

I teach typical courses in the field of mass communication such as mass communication theory and mass media effects. Courses that are gradually becoming typical in communication and journalism departments across the country have substantial treatment of diversity issues. By virtue of my training, interest, and ethnic heritage, I teach diversity courses in my department and create interdisciplinary courses that benefit the university offerings as a whole. I am pleased that typical students at the University of Connecticut, who come from the majority culture, have interest in taking diversity courses. Much interest comes from the basic consideration that my diversity courses are on the list of upper division courses for the communication sciences major; they are not taken simply as electives. My courses have real value to the major and can also be used to fulfill requirements for other majors or minors such as women studies, Latino studies, and Latin American and Caribbean studies. In addition, some students are just plain hungry for diversity courses and will take as many as they can find. These kinds of students come to my office regularly and are active in a broad range of activities on campus.

Finally, students overall enjoy taking my diversity courses. I try to balance my classes with lecture, discussion, and applied exercises. The students appreciate the tripartite approach that has the classic ingredient of the lecture and also has interesting content and engaging teaching techniques. In particular, they enjoy the opportunity for interaction with the instructor and with themselves in the classroom. Let me share a variety of anonymous responses that I have received as part of class evaluations. First, the course called “Women and Ethnicity (and Media)” brought more awareness about Latina and African American women’s issues. A student in the spring of 2001 wrote,

I was made aware of some major issues facing women. It was important to be made aware of these events in order to understand where women have come and where they are headed.

Another student wrote,

She challenged us to think about social roles, women’s social roles in particular.
Other students in the same course touched on content and teaching technique in their statements:

She tried to integrate social issues, matters of race, gender and body form. By viewing films, doing various readings, and conducting discussions, she conveyed the importance of pondering these issues and searching for answers, for improvements. I loved this class.

Another student said,

Great use of discussion. Very interesting and stimulating, and then goes on to point out the qualities of discussion and content, Loved the course! Good discussion and enjoyable. 24 Hour Woman. Like Water for Chocolate [motion pictures].

A common media diversity course that uses Wilson and Gutierrez (1995) as the main text is called “Media and Minorities Across the Country.” When I offered this course in the fall of 1999, it was a hit. One student’s statement referred to the techniques I used for the class that allowed them to get involved in their material through discussion and small group exercises. One anonymous student said, “She allowed the students to be involved.”

**Dialoguing About What Inspires and Motivates**

We draw strength from the positive balance in our interactions with students and colleagues. Our commitment to making a difference and our understanding that we are still in the stage of breaking ground keeps us on track and helps us develop the resilience necessary to move forward. We must also model endurance and perseverance for those who follow our path.

**Xaé**

I try to focus on the feedback that will energize me in my struggle to move forward and to stay positive. I read all evaluations carefully and try to understand the ones that raise doubts about my performance. Many undergraduates are uncomfortable with assignments that require personal viewpoints on issues of equity, and some take issue with my constructivist pedagogy stance. I always make a note on my syllabi regarding the tentative nature of anticipated assignments, and I explain that although there is a text, we will cover other topics, and assignments will be substituted as needed. I construct the course with their input as we move forward and introduce relevant topics from our context such as the events of September 11, 2001. In spite of this, some students will complain of the unpredictable nature of the
assignments and not understand the rationale of relevance and the teaching adaptive to their needs. Others dwell on the issue of difference in who I was and what I represented in their academic experience. Some sample entries include:

The only class in which I have ever had a Latino instructor was the large Multicultural 5 week seminar course, which you taught. This lack of exposure had left me with very little knowledge of Latino thoughts, ideas or struggles. (D. S., White female, 2000)

Since I have been at [the university], I have had a few more minority teachers, though certainly not many in comparison with the number of White professors I have had. I had two African-American teachers, two Puerto Rican teachers, and one Iranian teacher. I found that the classrooms of these teachers were much more rich than the other classes I have taken. I have felt that these teachers make a much more conscious effort to be sensitive to all students in the classroom than White teachers. All of these teachers have come across as being very friendly and open to discussion while still maintaining a professional atmosphere, and I respect these teachers for the chance to participate as an active member in my education. These teachers have taught me to always be sensitive of students and to value each person for their insight and experience. The minority teachers I have had in my educational career have made my education much more rich than it would have been had I only been exposed to White teachers. I hope that efforts to recruit more minority teachers in the state . . . will be successful. (M. H., White female, 2001)

The diversity among students is more apt to occur in ethnic studies courses, and this itself enhances the experience of the students:

The class lectures and discussions were even more meaningful to me than the book. This allowed me to listen to what other people in the class had to say about the topic being discussed. I know that I really didn’t contribute in class but most of the concerns and comments that other people had were the same as mine. I really enjoyed the diversity that the class had. There were cultures represented from all over the world. It was nice to here the different opinions. Over all I found this class to be extremely enlightening. The only thing that I would change is to make this class a requirement before student teaching. There are not enough multicultural classes offered. The world is not the same and the University needs to recognize this and change things. (T. H., White male, 2001)

These comments from students reaffirm the need to diversify both the faculty and the student body to create the critical mass that is needed for education to be a truly transformative experience. Discussions where there are multiple perspectives are essential for cognitive dissonance and reciprocal learning to occur.
Diana

Student feedback sheets on the materials used for the course provide me with timely knowledge about how useful or inspirational materials are for students. It can be difficult for majority students to wrestle with social critique when issues of race are brought to the fore. As described by Rios (2002) in “A Latina University Professor: Stranger in Her Own Classroom,” a woman of color who uses materials that challenge entrenched ideas about race/ethnicity and cultural process may be received with great hostility. On the other hand, when students are more intensely preselected, a more open group of students is in the classroom. In my women and ethnicity course, students gave feedback to race and gender issues in the book All of Me by Venise Berry (2000). In this book, Berry wrestles with the modern day challenges of an African American female journalist in the broadcast news industry. A Latina student wrote, “Venise Berry truly captures the essence of what many women and minorities encounter. I feel it is so unfair that we live in a society that deals with differences in people in such a horrible way.” This same Latina student felt that her issues were validated in the book:

I loved this book!!! It was a wonderful book that was hard for me to stop reading. I think many more books need to be written to help women deal with these issues. I know it helped me deal with mine. Venise—write another book please!!!

A White woman expressed,

I think this book did a good job in addressing race and gender discrimination issues. I thought it brought right to the forefront how women and women of color are underrepresented and forced to fit into a one mold, which proves impossible.

Overall, the students in the class vocally expressed that All of Me (Berry, 2000) should be used again for this diversity course. I have experienced over the years, that materials that inspire and motivate students might be particular to a college or university, so feedback sheets during a semester are very helpful.

Conclusions: Reflecting on Our Dialogue

We end this dialogue on a positive note as we acknowledge the opportunity we have had to explore issues and strategize together on ways to support each other. We strengthen our resolve to stay involved in our communities. Our collaboration in writing, research, and scholarship is as natural as our construction of familial relationships with friends. Extended families in our lives are geographically unavailable, and we embrace those who remind us of our cultural values. We nurture the events and situations that speak to
these in our personal and professional settings. The practices and experiences of others are as important as our own. A greater understanding of the challenges in our context might provide guidance for those who choose to follow our footsteps.

References


Xaé Alicia Reyes is an associate professor in the NEAG School of Education and the Puerto Rican/Latino Studies Institute at the University of Connecticut–Storrs. Her research and teaching focuses on issues of language, culture, and migratory experiences.

Diana I. Ríos is an associate professor in the Department Communication Sciences and the Puerto Rican/Latino Studies Institute (PRLS) and is associate director for PRLS at the University of Connecticut–Storrs. Her research and teaching interests include minorities, women and media, media effects, and cross-cultural communication.