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Tom Hearney
National-Louis University, USA

Roberto Sanabria
National-Louis University, USA

Elizabeth Tesdell
National-Louis University, USA

Wendy Figueroa
National-Louis University, USA

Delilah Garcia
National-Louis University, USA

See next page for additional authors

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Author Information

Tom Hearney, Roberto Sanabria, Elizabeth Tesdell, Wendy Figueroa, Delilah Garcia, Marvin Garcia, Lourdes Lugo, Gloricelly Martinez-Franceschi, Socorro Rivera, Tito Rodriquez, and Erica Van Opstal

Reinventing the Adult Education Curriculum within an Urban Latino Community

Tom Heaney, Roberto Sanabria, and Elizabeth Tisdell
with Wendy Figueroa, Delilah Garcia, Marvin Garcia, Lourdes Lugo,
Gloricelly Martinez-Franceschi, Socorro Rivera, Tito Rodriguez, and Erica Van Opstal
National-Louis University, USA

Abstract: This paper will examine an adult education Masters program developed in collaboration with an urban Latino community. Its pedagogy and its content are described in the voices of students reflecting on how they have applied their new understandings and research skills to social change initiatives within the community.

The Challenge of Inclusion

Graduate programs in higher education have long recognized the need to serve all in a social environment divided by race, gender, and class. Most have floundered, however, in their attempts to engage groups with the greatest interest in changing social conditions-among them urban Latinos (Darder, 2001; Padilla, 1997). Resulting frustration has been analyzed from a variety of theoretical perspectives including critical theory, feminist theory, Afrocentric perspectives, and multicultural pedagogy-all having social change within their purview. A renewed interest in social movements as the ground for emancipatory education (Adams, 2000; Muñiz, 1998; Torres & Katsiaficas, 1999) has given further impetus to these discussions. However, as Jeria (1999) notes, what is lacking within the field of adult education is particular attention to Latinos-the fastest growing minority in the United States. If we are serious about developing multicultural and culturally relevant adult education methodologies, we must begin to address the needs of the Latino community.

Such a beginning was made in a program jointly sponsored by a private urban university that had previously offered graduate degrees in adult education and three Latino organizations-a "grass roots" activist center, an organization working to improve the situation of Latinos in a beleaguered school system, and a bi-lingual college for Spanish-speaking adults. Initial meetings with leaders in the community identified both the need for and the possibility of a graduate adult education curriculum grounded in Latin American experience, with an emphasis on educación *popular*. Students, all of whom were engaged in their own communities as educator/activists, were recruited by the three organizations.

Faculty teams guided the coursework-each team comprising a member of the graduate faculty and a member of the Latino community with both academic background and experience relevant to the course content. The curriculum was based on existing courses, adapted through frequent and rigorous negotiations with students, adjunct Latino faculty, and members of the sponsoring organizations. The result was a refreshingly vital and culturally engaging revision of the

traditional, on-campus program-revisions that now spill over and inform the university's curriculum offered to the general public.

Curriculum: Rebuilding on a New Foundation

In the following we provide several examples of how this reinvention of curriculum integrated traditional content with the concerns and cultural richness of a Latino community.

The first course sequence wove together two classes, "Adult Development and Learning" and "Adult Learning in Groups" This sequence was team taught by Libby Tisdell and Roberto Sanabria. Roberto is a Puerto Rican activist, teaches history at Roberto Clemente High School, and recently received his doctorate in adult education at National-Louis University. The course made use of standard texts such as *Learning in Adulthood* (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), while a supplemental reading packet emphasized Latino authors, including Judith Ortiz Coffey (1995) and Antonia Pantoja (in Perry, 1998). In addition, students did a collaborative book review related to adult development and learning among Latino populations, choosing from a list of authors which included Padilla (1997), Hurtado (1996), Freire (1997), and Valdez (1996).

The cohort spent a day in the Puerto Rican community, examining educational and community based programs that incorporated music, food, story telling, cultural symbols, and murals. The group then analyzed these experiences in relation to adult education literature on experiential learning.

The second course sequence, entitled "History, Philosophy, and Culture in Adult Education," was taught by Tom Heaney and Jose Lopez. Jose is a sociologist at Northeastern Illinois University, a founder of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, and a leader in the Puerto Rican Independence Movement. The course engaged participants in the political task of defining adult education, contrasting practices from Latin America and the Caribbean with practices firmly rooted in systems of western power and civilization (see Ramos-Zayas, 1998). Through the eyes of Fanon (1963) and an anthology of writings on resistance and education (Golden, McConnell, Mueller, Poppen, & Turkovich, 1991), the cohort looked at colonialism and neo-colonialism as projects both served by and countered by current adult education practices.

In order to construct a culturally relevant historical overview of adult education, students studied leaders unknown to most American adult educators-Pedro Albizu-Campos, Eugenio Maria Hostos, Jose Julian Martí, Antonia Pantoja, and others. Each of these educators embedded their educational work within struggles against colonialism in both the United States and Puerto Rico. Finally, several field visits to rallies, marches, cultural events, and alternative education sites helped to ground reflection on the practice of these historical Latino leaders in the contemporary lifeworld of the community.

A third course sequence on "Instructional Communication" and "Research Methods in Adult Education" was taught by Libby Tisdell and Silvia Villa. Silvia is the assistant director of the Latino Cultural Center at University of Illinois Chicago. In this course, qualitative and action research studies by and about Latino authors were used as examples. In addition, David Abalos's (Abalos, 1998) theory of education for social transformation for the Latino community was a

centerpiece of the instructional communication course because it is grounded in the identity and educational/cultural experience of the community. In blending these texts and experiences, the students and faculty alike created a more culturally relevant approach to Latino adult education.

Research: Giving Voice to People's Knowledge

What academics have increasingly recognized as participatory action research is occurs frequently in the Latino community. Unfortunately, the academic adult education community seldom benefits from such research in its forums of public discourse. The Latino Masters curriculum drew attention to these community-based and action research projects that serve the interests of local communities. The program demonstrated in both its pedagogy and content how direct engagement with Latino scholar-activists can serve the community, not only recognizing the knowledge construction processes embedded in day-to-day life, but adding significantly to knowledge within the broader field of adult education. In addition, Latino issues raised in the wider field of education (Abalos, 1998; Anzaldúa, 1990; Darder, Torres, & Gutiérrez, 1997; Hurtado, 1996; Nieto, 2000; Padilla, 1997) can begin to serve as a literature base for an emerging Latino adult education curriculum. However, we need to move beyond this base by multiplying the voices of Latino scholars within the field. The power and vision of such voices is evident in the Statement of Mission written by students in the Latino cohort and reproduced below, as well as in the individual statements by students that follow.

The Cohort Defines Its Mission

The Latino Masters began in January 2000 with the intent of engaging educators within the Latino community in an experiment in higher education—an eighteen-month graduate curriculum leading to a Masters degree in adult education.

In this process we have discovered many similarities and differences among us. While the majority share similar backgrounds, each one of us holds varying perspectives on issues ranging from education to religion. However, there are also many similarities that have brought us together. Building on the strength of these similarities, we decided to create a Statement of Mission that represents our common interests and goals. Ultimately, we hope that our cohort becomes a model for others in our community and stimulates other institutions to look at the Latino community as an asset in this city and throughout the world.

As Latinos in the United States we have begun to understand the value of culturally relevant education. It is in the presence of racism and discrimination that our culturally embedded values become our shield, as well as the most positive defense against oppression. We also believe that we gain strength by creating awareness about the Latino experience and sharing that experience with those around us.

In consonance with a long history of Latinos that have lived in this country, we understand that real quality education builds and reinforces consciousness, and that heightened consciousness may translate into a search for social justice and equality. In the process of understanding adult education, we have come to realize the power that both individual and collective transformation

has in our community.

Lastly, this program is a model for other institutions of higher education to begin to open their doors, to see the potential of the Latino community, and to provide this community access to their programs. But it is not only our program which provides a model, but we ourselves who hope to model in our practice the power of teaching and learning. Both as a group and individually, we commit ourselves as activists and educators to the continuous development of emancipatory adult education theory and practice.

Voices of Adult Educators in the Latino Community

Graduates emerging from this program have made use of critical pedagogy and culturally relevant adult education methods within their master's program and in their own educational practices within the Latino community. In the following, several of those students describe the benefits of this university/community partnership. Through reflections and examples of projects, students unveil the possibilities for maintaining a cycle of research-to-practice in the context of a culturally grounded curriculum.

Gloricelly Martinez-Franceschi & Socorro Rivera

As graduate students of a Master's level cohort in adult education, we are committed to empowering the Latino community by providing culturally relevant education. From our own experiences in the educational system, we realized and understood the need to learn in relation to our own reality. We recognized that the Latino experience has been widely ignored, not only in psychological approaches to ways of knowing, like that of Belenky et al. (1986), but also in the exclusion of our political and sociocultural experiences in adult education. Our political, historical, social, and personal faces have been obliterated by the very educational system that seeks to adapt us to a mainstream culture. As adult educators, we acknowledge the need to recognize these factors and begin examining the implication of literature on race, gender and class within the Latino community.

We conducted a study to examine the results of a culturally relevant curriculum in a Latino writing class. Our research was grounded in David Abalos' theory of transformation learning (1998). Our hope was that the new curriculum not only allow learners to read and write in their new language, but also involve them personally, allowing them to draw on their beliefs, values, and lived experiences in the community. The results of that study have not only transformed the students in the writing class, but us in the way we view our role as adult educators.

Tito Rodriguez

As an adult educator, my goal is to create situations in which learners can engage in a process of self-discovery leading to liberation. Self-discovery does not imply that the learner exists in a void, but rather recognizes his/her role as connected to others in the community. It's also about helping individuals become more aware of their beliefs and assumptions, of conditions within their neighborhoods, and of the connections between those conditions and the world. Through such reflections the learner gains respect for the strengths and rights of others. If in the process of self-discovery the individual finds that the conditions of day-to-day life are oppressive and must

be changed for his/her personal as well as social good, then he/she must act to transform those conditions. This alone will bring about liberation for both self and others.

For the past ten years, I have been using art and culture as tools for self-discovery in the education of young adults. Through readings encountered in this Masters cohort, and specifically the influence of Paulo Freire (1970; 1997), my commitments as an adult educator and learner have been clarified and reinforced. As Freire demonstrated in his earliest work in Brazil, the arts and their connection to culture engage learners on levels beyond the rational and facilitate communal connection and liberation for social change.

The cohort has helped me further develop my knowledge and skills and given me the opportunity to reflect on my own culturally grounded experience. I now see my community in a new way. As a result, I have created an organization that will promote self-discovery, awareness and liberation/social change through art and education. This organization is called AfriCaribe.

Delilah Garcia

I was born and raised in Chicago. I work in the community with a non-for-profit organization, *Aspira*, which helps young adults finish high school and enter college. Through this Masters program I have been able to connect theory with my practice, connecting the writings of Latin American adult educators (Darder et al., 1997; Padilla, 1997) to my world of work and personal experience in the *barrios* of Chicago. I had, in fact, already been putting theories of transformative and liberatory learning into practice, without knowing what those theories were until I began this program.

Sharing our experiences has been an essential part of learning within this cohort. By joining this program, I now have a responsibility for educators in my community, encouraging them to further their education and to inform their practice with the rich traditions of Latino educators. Through this program we have not only gained credentials, enabling us to overcome barriers to employment, but also to publish our own writings in adult education and insure that Latino voices are heard. With learning has come commitment!

Marvin Garcia

The Puerto Rican community of Humboldt Park is a culturally rich area of families struggling to carve out a modest living. Central to the community struggle is the role of schools. The current situation is dire; more teens are dropping out of schools, more young women without a high school education are becoming mothers, gang involvement and violence have become part of the community milieu. Community based programs created to serve youth are stretched and many times at odds with policy makers who fund them.

An important factor in changing this reality is to make education responsive to the needs and concerns of the community. The educational philosophy of Paulo Friere (1970), which has been applied to adult education, is also applicable to issues facing our high schools. Schools must become places to analyze and address problems. Inspired by Friere's work, many alternative school educators in the Puerto Rican community have taken on the challenge of creating programs that are relevant to our youth. However, lacking resources and consigned to the

collective task of keeping a school open, many practitioners are looking for ways to network with community and schools.

The purpose of my project has been to remedy this. I am collecting data and providing a clearinghouse of unique alternative school practices that can serve as models for the Puerto Rican community and urban educators. The information will be disseminated on a web site with text, photos, and videos as well as essays about advocacy work on education. The goal is to help schools engage students in their education by incorporating community issues and applying the principles of a liberatory adult education practice.

Wendy Figueroa

While most of our cohort members are Puerto Rican, we have different backgrounds. Some of us were born on the island, others were born in el barrio. I was born in Puerto Rico and came to Chicago as a social worker without knowing English or having professional experience. I worked as a counselor in an agency where English skills were not required because the clients spoke Spanish. Now, as coordinator of a mentoring program at Aspira, developing skills in English has been a big challenge.

I discovered myself in Paulo Freire's writings (1970) when he described the transformative effects of learning and the need to ground learning in adult experience. Through my studies, I have become even more committed to helping immigrants from the island overcome their own language barriers. But the barriers are more than language. I have been awakened to critical issues within our community-issues of language, school drop-outs, teen pregnancy, low self-esteem, and the negation of knowledge about our history and culture. My work now is to support people struggling to overcome these barriers and encourage them to continue their education.

Lourdes Lugo

My most profound experience within the Latino Masters cohort has been the realization of the extraordinary value of my culture and nationality. I have always and everywhere been clear about being Puerto Rican, but until now I did not understand how my Puerto Rican identity meant that I learned differently from others. In some ways I have been called into a vision of the world from a Puerto Rican perspective. The lessons come to me in poetry, in the beating of drums, in dance, in bright colors of reds and greens. I will remember these lessons for the rest of my life, because these symbols of my identity have profound meaning for me.

As a learner I require information that will allow me to transform my reality, better my community, contribute to others by being a better person. That is how I learn. As an adult, and I feel I have been an adult since I was 15 years old, I learned that information must have meaning and must be tied to my reality. The cohort has helped me name my process of learning, as well as join others with similar experiences in understanding this process.

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