

The Immigrant Project

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Perhaps no single phenomena better represents the theme "Southern California in the World and the World in Southern California" than the immigrant population of the region. Contemporary immigrants in Los Angeles serve to remind us of the extensive US military, political and economic involvement throughout the world. This US involvement has helped to spur massive US-bound migration. And, because immigrants maintain ties to their homelands, money they acquire and the lessons they learn about such things as government, economics, and basic human rights flow out from the region to countries around the world.

The number of immigrants involved in this transnational movement is substantial. About 900,000 legal permanent residents are admitted each year --in 1997, new immigrants and their children constituted about 55 million in the US (roughly 1/5 of the U.S. population). In Los Angeles, the dimensions are particularly impressive: New immigrants and their children constituted 62% of LA's population in 1997. About half of the recent immigrants to LA come from only 3 countries--Mexican, El Salvador, and Guatemala (Rumbaut, 1998).

Our SC/W project started with the unique notion that our "exhibit" would be the immigrant community and our "viewers" would be USC students. We launched a project connecting up USC courses on immigration from Central America and Mexico with three agencies serving the community. As the semester continued, we broadened our "exhibit" to offer students opportunities to see immigrant life within the context of local churches and a parent education program at a nearby school. As a culmination project, a small number of students were invited to attend a mini-conference of leaders of Hometown Association thereby having the opportunity to see immigrants in different roles.

Our "participant-observers" included fifteen University of Southern California students from four classes including history, political science, sociology and a multidisciplinary course involving geography and sociology (La Frontera). The students themselves demonstrate the diversity that is L.A. Of the sixteen students involved, six were first or second generation Americans, six were of Spanish-speaking ancestry, three were of Asian ancestry, and just over half (seven) were of Anglo heritage. These students worked with seven professionals at the three agencies in the Pico Union Neighborhood, interviewed church leaders and parishioners in the Pico Union neighborhood and twelve parents in the parent education program at Norwood Elementary School, and witnessed forty immigrants involved in Hometown Associations discuss the many issues of more than 25 different organizations.

The success of our efforts is best summarized in the words of our students;

In class, the situation of the border, for all of its depictions and descriptions of the struggles of those who cross, seemed as close to me as the six o'clock news: present and real, yet removed and not really understood. The first day I walked into El Rescate Legal Services, I saw families, waiting with their respective family members, who sought help with for their immigration problems. The helplessness of their situation felt very real and present. George Deur

This (experience) helped me put faces to some of the numbers that we have heard of in class. Jose Galvan I had stereotypes of the Spanish community. I thought that most of the people were dangerous because I have heard many stories on the news and from others about the surrounding community . . . After interviewing some of the Norwood community, my views have changed . . . I found that their dedication to changing their lives to especially courageous and heart warming. Minling Chuang

In attempting to conceptualize these varied projects, we divided the immigrant experience into three sequential, albeit artificial, categories:

- Departing the homeland and trying to survive as strangers in a strange land;
- Establishing roots and becoming citizens; and
- Wrestling with issues of transnationalism and identity for both self and family.

One of the typical costs of university engaging in service-learning is that service placements generally put students in situations in which community members are seen as somewhat passive recipients of the largess of systems both bureaucratic and benign. This is simply an unavoidable fact of life. Our original proposal in which we planned to have students work with three agencies serving the Spanish-speaking community (CHIRLA, CARECEN, El Rescate) was consistent with this tradition. The eight students who worked with the agencies saw the difficulties new immigrants had in gaining a secure foothold in this country and became intimately aware of the legal and economic challenges that new arrivals face.

Two students in an upper division research methodology course elected to work with Professor Hondaneu-Sotelo (sociology) in conducting a qualitative research project on the religious and social services offered to immigrants by St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic church just blocks from the agencies listed above. These students saw the struggles that immigrants face but less from a political standpoint and more from an economic, spiritual and personal point of view.

Students involved in the parent education project at Norwood Elementary were fortunate in that they were asked to participate in a very different type of service-learning project. Early in the Spring semester, Dick Cone, a member of Norwood's Healthy Start Collaborative, volunteered to find students to document Norwood's exceptional parent education program. Cone recommended the project to Professor Terry Seip whose American History course focuses on the question of what does it mean to be American. Professor Seip agreed to participate and four students were recruited to interview parents. These interviews were structured so that they would track each immigrant's story from their homeland in Mexico or Central America to the U.S. and document both the obstacles to be over-come and the steps taken to become full-fledged members of our American society. As a consequence, these students had an opportunity to examine all three categories of the immigrant experience.

Unfortunately, only two students had an opportunity to attend our closing event, a full day meeting of the leaders of Hometown Associations (HTA). This project grew out of a conversation between Professor Rivera-Salgado and one of the professionals at El Recate. Over lunch they shared their mutual interests in Hometown Associations, grassroots organizations that developed out of a desire of immigrants to stay connected to and contribute to life in their places of origin. Further discussion led to the fact that Professor Hamilton had connections with many of the Central American Hometown Associations. Out of these conversation came a plan to host a one-day meeting in which that original conversation could be enlarged and many others could share information and learn from one another. A student who had completed a research paper for Professor Hondagneu-Sotelo on hometown associations and whose parents are active in the HTA movement in Chicago was hired to help organize the event. At the meeting (Working in Community Across Many Borders: LA-Based Hometown Associations from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico), students (and other university participants) were able to see empowered immigrants discussing highly complex challenges involving social, political, and economic ties to their homelands. At this session, there was little evidence of a victim mentality. We came away awed by the knowledge and the accomplishments of these individuals, with a deeper understanding of, and appreciation for, the issues of a transnational community.

Departing the homeland and trying to survive as strangers in a strange land

Students in the Norwood project had the best opportunity to hear the testimony of immigrants about the events leading up to immigration. They had heard the stories of people coming to take advantage of our economy but, as one students put it, *"I cannot begin to imagine how difficult (it was) for them to leave everything and venture into the unknown"* (Chuang). They heard the story of one immigrant who left a village that had not changed much in the past one hundred years, a village without electricity and without well water during the months of March and April. They heard how this immigrant could not go to school after sixth grade because to do so meant moving to another city as the village had only an elementary school. Life consisted of watching seven younger siblings while her mother worked in the fields and her father worked in a distant city to earn money to send home. Even this was not enough income and, when the immigrant reached the age of 20, she and her older brother were sent to the U.S. to earn money to help support the family.

Our students, ages 19 - 21, could identify with the enormity of this event, particularly given the lack of education and sophistication of the immigrant. They could envision themselves in a strange land not knowing the language, not having marketable skills, and with an obligation not only to support

themselves but to send money home to help the family.

These same students learned of the options available to immigrants. The people they interviewed described their jobs in garment warehouses, factories, and as housekeepers. Students working with the agencies had the opportunity to see that many of these immigrants had no legal protection because of their status as undocumented residents of the country. These students could see that while many Americans oppose immigration because *"it takes jobs away from Americans. (M)ore often than not, it is these middle class American families that are exploiting their nannies, housekeepers and gardeners by paying them low wages and making them work long hours"*(Jaramillo).

Interviewers at Norwood found that many of the women immigrants, hoping to find not only love but also greater security and companionship, married. Typically they married another immigrant and continued a marginal existence with no greater sense of economic or political security. Children only seemed to make them feel less secure. Many added to their list of concerns a deeper sense of loneliness and inadequacy about their ability to offer their children a better life. As one interviewee put it:

I came to Los Angeles 10 years ago without speaking English and with a head full of dreams of prosperity for me and my family. I was only a homemaker married with a macho Mexicano and when I wanted to study, his answer would be, "No. It is a waste of time. Stay home take care of the kids and keep house." At that time, I wouldn't say anything. I would only obey . . ." Cecilia Vasquez

Trapped between a traditional marriage and a seemingly uncaring society that they did not understand very well nor feel welcome within, many of the female immigrants interviewed describe themselves as having little self-esteem.

While this personal struggle goes on in the lives of immigrants, there is the appearance of a public vendetta against them. Students working with the three agencies had an opportunity to see the obstacles that are put in place by an uncaring if not hostile bureaucracy in response to public hostility toward the Spanish-speaking immigrant community. Recent initiatives have resulted in increased difficulty for poor immigrants to secure food stamps, disability aid, welfare, and health care. One student working with CHIRLA (the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles), worked on the Census 2000 project helping residents of our community to be counted and given full representation. She also worked with the logistics for "Immigrant Day" in Sacramento, a day in which immigrants and their advocates gathered in Sacramento to *"bring their voices into the public process . . . because most of the times, the immigrants and poor people are ignored"* (Lu).

Our students, without regard to the nature of their projects, found that immigrants seemed to find solace through establishing bonds with other immigrants who shared in their struggles whether those bonds were created within the walls of a sympathetic agency, a welcoming church or a concerned neighborhood school. As one interviewee said, *"Here at St. Thomas, you can always find a home away from home, you can find friends and you can always feel welcomed . . ."* (from Beltran). Another commented, *"Norwood (Elementary School) is like my home"* (from Salinas).

Establishing roots and becoming citizensSome students worked with immigrants trying to work through the labyrinth of *"the most bureaucratic and expensive procedures"* (Deur) that offer hope of eventual citizenship. The case of Jose Romero (pseudonym) is documented carefully by one of our students. Romero, a citizen of El Salvador was applying for a suspension of deportation through El Rescate. The form, the notorious I-881, demands that a person summoned for deportation offer proof that:

- They can document their presence in the country for at least ten years,
- They have significant financial, civic, and familiar ties to the U.S.,
- They are of upstanding moral character,
- They have no criminal records,
- They can attest that neither they nor family members have been active drug smugglers or traders,
- They have registered with ABC or TPS (two government programs to register aliens) and

- They can offer evidence that their deportation would "have a negative psychological impact on your children or close relatives.

In addition to the challenges these criteria pose for the best of record keepers among us, the questions, according to the student who worked with Mr. Romero, "*reveal immigration security biases by asking yes/no questions in the vein of 'have you, or any of your family members, been active drug smugglers or traders?' "* (Deur). This student concludes that the experienced has helped him value "*the fact that I don't have to justify my being on this side of the border*" (Deur).

Our students had the opportunity to see immigrants identifying what it took to move beyond survival and gain a foothold in this new land. As one student reported, (*The immigrants I interviewed*) "*realized that learning English is key to getting a better job in America, so the first step in reinventing their lives was to learn English*" (Matsuda). One student who was conducting interviews and making observations at St. Thomas instead of interviewing, "*often found (herself) practicing English with people . . . and always encountered long question/answer sessions about my schooling and goals for the future*" (Lemma).

Our students found that for many parents, especially the mothers, children are a primary motivating force behind language acquisition and other self-improvement strategies. They want to be able to help children with their homework and be good role models. Paula, a young immigrant mother who is studying English and working toward a GED, proudly reported that her daughter tells friends that her mother is "*going to go to college*". Students who interviewed Paula reported her daily schedule to be as follows:

7:30 - 11:30 Volunteer in the Norwood Parent Center and in classroom's
 11:30 - 12:30 Help in Cafeteria
 12:30 - 2:30 English as a Second Language Class
 2:30 - 6:00 Homemaker, help kids with homework
 6:00 - 8:45 GED classes two nights a week/Computer classes two nights a week

To this and similar testimonies from parents, one student reports, "*I have also been taking my education for granted. None of my interviewees had graduated from high school. However, now, decades after, they are starting over and are excited about learning, something you do not hear from college students now*" (Matsuda). Another writes, "*My parents immigrated to this country . . . I know that I am privileged to have been born in this country, and I have learned to appreciate my parent's struggles more. Most of the women reminded me of my mom. My mom began taking ESL classes eight years ago and she will be getting her B.A. in liberal studies this May*" (Salinas). Maybe Paula's daughter's comments may not be simply childhood fantasies.

In addition to English, GED and computer classes, Norwood offers parents opportunities to volunteer and to perfect job skills, improve parenting skills, and take a citizenship class while providing child care and advocacy. They also serve as a conduit to a health *promotores* program that is operated by a non-profit organization in the community. After meeting with several of the women who had completed the Norwood programs and *promotores*, a student wrote, "*these programs have been very successful in helping parents, mostly mothers, to become more confident and secure about themselves and their abilities. (They were) presented with an opportunity to start afresh and make a new life for themselves*" (Thornton).

For many of the parents at Norwood this "new life" involves employment, particularly within the health services field where outreach to the Spanish-speaking community is a major challenge to health service providers. More than half of the parents interviewed are working part or full time with agencies providing health services. As one student wrote, "*(The parents) have been working extremely hard and they are very proud of what they have accomplished, as they should be*" (Matsuda).

Wrestling with issues of transnationalism and identity for both self and family

Transnationalism, is "*the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement*" (Basch 1994, in Ruiz). Our students had an opportunity to witness many forms of this process and to experience the tension and the soul

searching that goes on relative to the issue of being citizens of two nations. Students interviewing at Norwood saw transnationalism primarily as a struggle between two cultures, the traditional culture of male dominance and western culture of women being active outside the home. Interestingly, they found the conflict was focused on the issue of what it means to be a good mother. To the men in the community, motherhood entailed being at home for the family and being subservient to the husband. To the women, being a good mother was being redefined as knowing English in order to be able to help kids, being good role models and being assertive in order to attain both intellectual and capital resources. The women interviewed at Norwood appear to be winning the battle with one proclaiming, ". . . *I have been a model for my husband who is studying and preparing himself for a better future*" (Vasquez).

Many of our students heard the immigrants described as "lonely". Traveling often from rural villages to a city like Los Angeles cuts them off not only from friends and family but an entire way of life that is community centered. Some try to recreate the sense of community by taking part in new social structures such as the charismatic movement within the Catholic Church. Others foster the old sense of community by working to maintain ties with people from their homelands through local hometown associations. Students conducting interviews at the Catholic Church found that parishioners were comfortable within the familiar environment of the church and drawn to the charismatic movement because it "*accepted people the way they are*" (Lemma) and offered men "*a rise in status by becoming preachers and leaders*" (Beltran).

Involvement in hometown associations is, on the surface, an attempt to maintain community by maintaining connections with other immigrants from the same geographic region. Fueled by what a student labeled "*return fantasies*" (Ruiz), immigrants use the ties to other immigrants and the home community to contribute to the well being of the village or city in Mexico or Central America.

The students findings indicate, however, that the "new" structure of the charismatic movement seemed to work to support the old culture, creating new conflicts while maintenance of "old ties" through hometown associations seemed to lead to the creation of new and highly dynamic social and political forces. One student found the charismatic movement promulgated "*vast gender inequalities (where) male preachers . . . preached about issues that appeal to male bias, such as obedience in the home and the value of female chastity. . . . The designated role of women becomes ingrained for the young women who attend weekly meetings*" (Beltran)

In sharp contrast, students found that the hometown associations offered immigrants "*a chance to be heard for the first time*" (Lemma) and "*avenues leading to political empowerment within their home communities*" (Ruiz). It is within these hometown associations that one can most clearly see immigrants wrestling with the issues of transnationalism. Founded to promote a sense of community and provide support for the homeland, many of these organizations begin to become committed to "*preserving each region's tradition, culture, and language here in the U.S*" (Lemma). A discussion at the one-day gathering of HTA leaders, this issue came into sharpest focus during a discussion of the role of HTAs serving indigenous people from Guatemala. One student noted the statements of leaders of a Mayan HTA led to a discussion in which many "*in the room were trying to understand the difference between a language and a dialect. . . . (Making it clear) that the problem of language and discrimination is not just here in the U.S.*" (Lemma).

And it is through the children of immigrants that one experiences the true effect of trying to live within two cultures. Immigrants reported coming to improve their lot in life but report that immigrant children often experience failure in schools and peer pressure to get involved in deviant behavior including drugs and gangs. Parents seem torn between providing support by holding on to the traditional culture or adapting to the ways of their adopted land. One student described a teen who is active in the St. Thomas youth group as "*a place of refuge, a place to belong to . . . (but also as) the only place her parents allowed her to go unsupervised*" (Beltran). Beltran also reported that the highly structured youth groups claim to "*retrieve wayward youth . . . from the brink of self-destruction*" although she reports that she did not "*meet any youth group members who admitted to alcohol or drug problems.*" Another student did interview a parishioner who "*spoke of a past addiction to drugs and alcohol . . . (whose) life has changed since coming to St. Thomas*" (Lemma).

At the other extreme is the immigrant community's knowledge that education is the key to success in

this culture. Immigrants often seem to be intimidated by schools and aware of the negative effects that the peer culture in schools affects their children. Yet almost all of our student interviewers found that parents realize that education is the only way that their children can fulfill the dreams that brought the families to the U.S. Lemma reported that the issue of education and scholarships was a central topic of conversation during the HTA meeting, even while being concerned about the conflict between education and cultural identity. All of the student interviewers at Norwood found that education was the central theme of those interviewed, with most parents recognizing that they played a critical role in supporting learning at home. Providing this support involved parents getting more educated and, in most cases, this involves women stepping outside the traditions of their own culture and beginning to acquire new skills and new ideas.

Caught between cultures, immigrants have no choice but to shape a new identity. Depending upon the resources and support available, this new identity can be very empowering (i.e. A leader in the community, an employed person, a lay preacher, a political force within the HTA movement) or can be disenfranchising (i.e. service recipient, gang member, drug user, parent of a failing student).

The Epistemology of Community-Based Education

While, on the surface, this project appears to be about immigration, it is, more accurately, a study about education. The central issue is how students use personal observations to make meaning and develop understanding. There is no question that the students acquired information and understanding through their work in the Spanish-speaking community. In some cases, that knowledge was internalized by students and transformed the way they thought about themselves, their families and society. In other cases, the knowledge seemed to shore up and personalize the information learned in class. There can be no doubt about the power of the narrative of immigrants upon these students.

But despite some effects that seemed to be generalizable across all students, there did seem to be different experiences based upon the nature of the perceived task. Experiential educators have come to realize that the formal setting of the task can have powerful effects upon the actual experiences encountered and the lessons learned. Our students had a range of tasks from very generic to relatively specific:

- Students attending the hometown association meeting were simply passive viewers with no ability to shape or guide the flow of information.
- Students from Professor's Seip's course were working against a general background of a course that asked, "what does it mean to be an American?" Students had a lot of opportunity to interpret that question broadly and let the words of people who are in the process of becoming American speak for themselves.
- Students working within the agencies serving the immigrant community clearly felt that their charge was to compare their experiences with the information given in class. This led to a more focused view of immigrants and a more narrow range of information.
- Students engaged in research were soliciting responses within a much more narrow range and were most interested in finding information that supported or failed to support key hypotheses.

Father Jay, head pastor at St. Thomas the Apostle Church, when asked what students might gain from working in the immigrant community replied:

" . . . They would . . . meet people from . . . a whole other experience. Generally here Central American people have come through wars and poverty and family separation . . . a dangerous journey northward . . . a whole process of getting established in a new country. These stories are more fascinating than the movies . . . or the novels."(Lemma)

We found that the narratives of immigrants were more than fascinating; they were highly informative. Those students who seemed to learn the most were those students who could ask the most general questions and allow the responses of community members to flow most freely. Students from Professor Seip's course asked very general questions about where people came from, what was life like for them when they arrived, what resources were available for them and what were their dreams and plans for the future. Students spent little time talking and a lot of time listening. They reported that they were

nervous initially about "prying", especially knowing that some of those being interviewed were undocumented but "*It gave (the immigrants being interviewed) much joy . . . to be able to talk about their experiences and really get those experiences documented*" (Matsuda).

On the other hand, one student researcher trying to explore a hypothesis that was not at all open ended found that, "*News of the breadth and subject matter spread to the parishioners. I soon found that the congregation would not stand for formal interviews*" (Beltran). Thus, while people seem to be eager to tell their stories, they are suspicious of someone who is looking for documentation for a story they feel is already written.

It is not that these two approaches cannot be combined - e.g., using open-ended questions to get information that would also be relevant to theory or for hypotheses-testing but such a combination requires an acquired skill. Students attempting to link theory and practice in any systematic process generally lack that skill. Students with the general task of documenting the immigrants story and those working with agencies never once brought in theories from their history class about the immigration and assimilation process. In fairness to the students, there was no requirement that they do so during the course of the semester but one would assume that some things they learned in the community would provoke some recollection of theory. Students asked to do more academic work either failed to properly cite theories or failed to add their own voice into the final paper, lending the paper an air of academic "objectivity" that belied the experience of the students. We, as educators, have to work hard on helping students learn how and when to assert their own voice even while maintaining a sense that their work builds upon and is anchored in the work of others.

Another factor, which shapes the quality of experiential opportunities, is the nature of the task. In this project, students who had lots of direct contact with immigrants and the opportunity to interact with them, found their experiences both more educational and more rewarding than those whose experiences were mediated by an agency. It is appropriate that agencies will want to have student volunteers come in to assist with much of the routine work that any agency struggles to complete. This means lots of paper work, documentation and menial labor. There are fewer opportunities for students to interact with people through these agencies. However, students working with these agencies do acquire a better understanding of the bureaucratic issues immigrants face and an inside view of the obstacles that must be over-come. They also had the opportunity to engage in such activities as composing letters to congressmen, planning meetings, and observing how decisions are made. Students conducting interview run the risk of wearing out there welcome with those who can facilitate interviews unless there is a clear outcome that is of some use to the community.

Perhaps most importantly, this project raises the question about the role that university faculty and staff play. There is a tendency for us to view ourselves as scholars helping young people acquire the habits of scholarship but this project suggests that our students are young people who are at a stage of life where they are still in the process of sorting out their personal value systems. In asking students to report on what they saw or to relate their observations to theory, we are asking them to be "objective" viewers. When the students working within the Norwood project were asked also to specifically comment on what the project taught them about themselves, the students went to great length to interweave their observations with their own thoughts about citizenship, stereotypes, and values. Another student commented, "*Helping these women has made me feel I have a purpose . . . I know people are depending on me*" (Zeineddine).

And this returns us to the original thought about making meaning. Meaning has both a social and a personal sense. We need to help students understand the work of others to help link them to the larger world and the knowledge that exists within society. At the same time, we must help validate the notion that their observations have personal merit and strength and play a role in defining who they are and how they, as individuals fit within this larger world. To do both of these, we have to give students opportunities to study society and participate in society while asking them to make the connection between the work of others and their own observations. And we have to ask them how this knowledge effects them and how they, in turn, might have an effect on the world.

References:

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Contributing Students:

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