

**A Lifetime of Learning to Teach
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Abstract

Influenced by Freinet, Freire, and Sherover-Marcuse, the author describes the evolution of her pedagogy, including a demystifying and empowering approach to working with graduate students in the dissertation process. Alma Flor Ada's educational philosophy and praxis, grounded in critical pedagogy and transformative education, developed in the context of several decades teaching doctoral students at the University of San Francisco's School of Education, in the International and Multicultural Education program. Included are various graduate-level classroom practices designed to encourage individual and group reflection on the learning process, build community, develop agency, explore culture, and balance group work and individual work.

Key words

Empowerment, transformation, pedagogy, multicultural, doctoral, praxis

A Lifetime of Learning to Teach

1. Introduction

For the last 34 years, I have been a university professor. Most of that time, I have taught at a doctoral program in International Multicultural Education at the University of San Francisco. At the same time, my love for literature has led to a career as a writer of fiction and non-fiction for both children and adults.

These diverse passions have informed one another in a variety of ways. My love for literature as a teaching tool inspired *A Magical Encounter*, a resource book on Latino children's literature written for teachers (Ada, 2003). A family literacy project in Pájaro Valley, designed to empower language-minority parents by using children's literature as a springboard for meaningful home-school interactions (Ada, 1988), eventually led to *Authors in the Classroom*, a complementary classroom-based process for encouraging parents, teachers, and children as authors co-created with Isabel Campoy (Ada & Campoy, 2004).

Yet it is only now that I am retiring from the university, that I am finding the opportunity to write in greater depth about my own journey as an educator, to reflect aloud on the praxis of learning alongside my students and sharing in their journeys of discovery and research.

For this I am grateful to the Journal for Latinos in Education, and in particular to Dr. Enrique Murillo. It is due to his invitation to share my educational journey that I am now taking the time to organize my reflections on what I have learned over the years as a university professor, and to describe the learning community that I have been privileged to co-create with my students. I also wish to thank my daughter, Rosalma Zubizarreta, for her insightful and supportive collaboration on this article.

2. Program History and Overview

In 1976, I was invited by Dr. Jose Llanes to join the faculty of a new doctoral program in International Multicultural Education at the University of San Francisco (USF). He was initiating this program with the support of a Title VII grant for developing educators who would in their own turn, mentor and support bilingual teachers.

While I had begun my formal university career as a professor of Latin American Literature at Emory University, I had become very active in the bilingual education movement during three years I had spent teaching at Mercy College in Detroit. In addition to establishing the first bilingual teacher training program in Michigan, I had helped to organize the Michigan Bilingual Education Association and to host the first Michigan conference on Latino Education. I had also founded the Journal of the National Association of Bilingual Educators.

While literature was still my first love, I felt a strong calling to the work of developing educators. I wanted to help grow leaders who, in addition to understanding the significance of bilingualism, would also be deeply informed by the perspectives of multiculturalism and critical pedagogy. I accepted Dr. Llanes' offer with great joy.

Dr. Llanes' inspiring vision was to create a program where all involved, 20 doctoral students and 7 professors, would engage in intensive seminars every week-end for a whole academic year. To this end, he invited the most distinguished scholars at the time, including Joshua Fishman, Bruce Gaardner, Wallace Lambert, Eduardo Hernández-

Chávez, and Henry Trueba, to spend one or two week-ends at USF discussing their work with the doctoral students and professors.

It was both an exhilarating and exhausting first year. All of our doctoral students had full-time employment in addition to the weekend seminars, while all of our professors had a full schedule of Masters and Credential courses that they taught during the week. The intensive seminars ran from early Saturday morning through Sunday evening every weekend. While it was a challenge for students to keep up with the readings, everyone was delighted with the opportunity to work so closely with such inspiring scholars. As a result of the intense pace, students were able to complete all of their doctoral courses by the end of the year, with the only remaining requirement being the completion of their dissertation.

At the end of that year, Dr. Llanes left the University of San Francisco for another teaching position. I was asked by Dean Calvin to take responsibility for the doctoral program for the following year. Thus began the on-going work of re-designing the program based on what we were learning.

Over the next several years, many changes were made to the structure of the program while seeking to preserve its original spirit of high-level inquiry, collegiality, and commitment to excellence. Classes were still scheduled on weekends to accommodate working adults, yet they were scheduled every other weekend. The course work was redesigned to include courses that would assist students in thinking about and planning for their dissertation from the beginning of the program. In combination with the slower pace, this meant that the course work now stretched out over three or four years, rather than only one. On the other hand, this enabled students to complete their dissertations shortly after completing their courses, or in some cases even concurrently.

During my time at USF, there were significant changes in the administration, which resulted in varying levels of support for our program. Over the years, my own role has been primarily as professor and Title VII coordinator. I have seldom held an administrative role, nor did I wish to do so. Yet, during periods of difficulty and challenge, I found that by working together with the students, they were the ones who were able to maintain the integrity of the program.

Throughout my years as a professor, my guiding principle has been the search for a creative balance between idealism and practicality. On the one hand, I feel a strong commitment to creating a classroom community conducive to personal transformation, where students can grow intellectually and affectively, where they can reflect deeply and critically on their own experiences and on the experiences of others. Several of the practices I have developed for this purpose will be described more fully below.

At the same time, I have developed an equally strong commitment to helping students master the practical requirements for obtaining a degree, so that they are able to apply what they have learned in ever-widening spheres of professional influence. I feel a great sense of accomplishment knowing that our former students will, in turn, continue to support the growth and development of others.

3. The Challenge of Research: Facing our Fears as a Practice of Empowerment

After Dr. Llanes' departure, one of the first things I began to realize was how much support our students would need in order to complete their dissertations. While most students who arrived at the doctoral level are quite capable of doing course work

even in the most difficult circumstances, very few came already knowing how to do independent research.

During my 29 years at USF, over 300 dissertations have been completed. I have had the pleasure of personally chairing 160 of them, and have been the second or third reader for many others. Many of these students had not previously written a substantial Master's thesis. A considerable number of them had been educated abroad or did not have English as their first language, and almost all of them were working full time when attending the doctoral program. Given these conditions, what we were able to accomplish would not have been possible, without a coherent pedagogical philosophy and practice based on both transformation and empowerment. In order to help my doctoral students with their theses, I had to draw on an important lesson I had learned earlier in life, about the need to face our fears.

I still remember vividly my first encounter with this insight, many years before I came to teach at USF. At the time, I was living in Peru, attending the University while working full-time as a high-school teacher. I had been asked to teach courses in which I had little preparation, and I was struggling to stay one lesson ahead of my students. One morning at the blackboard, I noticed that I was attempting to disguise my handwriting to cover my uncertainty about the spelling of a few words I needed to write. I also realized that I had developed the art of giving ambiguous answers, delving into another subject in which I had some expertise, or else telling distracting stories whenever I was unsure of the answer to their questions. What was I really trying to achieve, I wondered? What value did all my dissembling have for my students? How could I possibly believe that I was gaining their respect? And if they did indeed hold me in some respect, what false model were they respecting? Was I really teaching them to cheat, to be insincere, to hide their limitations rather than confront them?

I can still see the shock in my student's faces when I dropped the chalk and turned to them to share my thoughts. After owning up to my own difficulties with spelling, I asked if any of them also experienced a similar challenge. When several hands went up, I suggested that we could all work together on it, and that I would welcome the opportunity to learn alongside them. For those who did not have difficulties with spelling, the vocabulary enrichment aspect of the exercises would make it worth their time. From then on, we opened every class with a five-minute spelling and vocabulary exercise. A few years later, the collected set of exercises I devised for this purpose became my first published book: *Ortografía Práctica* (Ada de Zubizarreta, 1964).

My newly-found commitment to recognizing my limitations was not restricted to spelling. From then on, I attempted to answer honestly every question that my students asked in the classroom, even if the answer had to be, "I don't know enough to say, but I will research your question." Often that search for answers would inspire a group or a class project.

Creating this kind of learning climate with my doctoral students many years later was a more challenging endeavor. They, too, had learned many coping mechanisms to disguise their own weaknesses. Yet the most difficult task that they would be facing was writing their dissertation, and I decided early on that it would be helpful for all of us to face this hurdle and its attendant fears head first.

I found that it was a liberating process to work together to analyze our own fears of research. From the perspective of critical pedagogy, we can see that keeping these fears alive, benefits only those who seek to control the gates of power. Complex nomenclature can easily intimidate us, yet learning the language of research is an important step toward empowering ourselves.

At the same time, I found it helpful to begin with validating what we already know. An encouraging first step is to realize that we have been informal researchers all of our lives, with our own life-long inquiries and our own history of conjecturing and testing and experimentation, that has given rise to all of the valuable learning and discoveries that we have made along the way. By deepening this experiential understanding of ourselves as researchers, we become much better positioned for learning the various protocols of formal research methods.

Another key aspect of demystifying the dissertation process is to break the process down into component parts. Rather than focusing on the 100-plus pages of the final voluminous product, students can learn to analyze a thesis as a document composed of distinct sections. With some advanced planning, many of those sections can be developed independently, as part of the course work for their doctoral courses. By designing the process in this manner, many students were able to complete their dissertations within a relatively short time after finishing their course work.

These, then, are some of the steps that I discovered in the process of helping students learn the discipline of research. It took me a few years to overcome the anxieties instilled by my own educational experiences, but when I was finally able to give my advisement handbook the title “The Joy of Research,” I knew we were embarked on an empowering adventure.

4. Creating A Broad-based Community of Learners

Over the years, I have noticed that my best courses, the ones in which students have been most engaged, have usually been the ones that included students with varying levels of program experience. Newer students clearly benefited from the example and participation of more experienced students, who were already accustomed to the highly interactive approach of our program. At the same time, experienced students would often comment on how their own understanding deepened whenever they had the opportunity to explain something to a newer student.

There are two related factors in our program design that have allowed this kind of rich interaction to take place, and I have worked hard to protect these design elements. While many programs benefit from having a cohort structure in which students follow an established sequence of courses, I believe our program has benefited from the decision to do things differently.

Out of five different programs in our School of Education, the International Multicultural Program is the only one that does not have a cohort structure with an established sequence of courses. One of the initial reasons for not choosing a cohort structure was that we did not want to force students to all take the same courses. As our students came from such diverse backgrounds, it seemed important to offer them some choices. In turn, offering students more alternatives meant that as professors, we were less likely to have students in our courses who had not freely chosen to be there.

While I was not able to convince the administration to do away with all course prerequisites, I was often able to find creative alternatives. For example, I sometimes recommended that students take the advanced research course twice: once when they first entered the program, to get a closer look at the end result of the process upon which they are embarking, and then again when they were further along. However, as students cannot receive credit for the same course twice, allowing them to sign up for a directed study was sometimes a workable way of meeting their educational needs.

I do believe that it is important for students to develop an on-going sense of connection with one another. While we chose to not have a formal cohort structure, I encouraged students to develop their own “affinity groups” to support one another through the process. These have often been groups of two, three, or four students, frequently at different stages of the program. Having students at different stages of the program attending classes together resulted in the development of a larger learning community that felt more like a family. Continuing students became links between those students who were just graduating and others who were just starting the program.

Over time, at the request of my advisees, I began offering voluntary retreats as way to strengthen this feeling of broader community. Usually our teaching weekends included a Friday evening class followed by a full day of classes on Saturday. Twice a year, during the first teaching weekend of the semester, we would add an extra day and gather on Sunday at an off-campus retreat site. This allowed the students, who were often traveling to the program from all over California and neighboring states, to meet with one another outside of class, to develop friendships, offer and receive support, delve more deeply on topics of mutual interest, and even design projects together.

The retreat was not directly connected with the University. While everyone was invited, attendance was voluntary. There was no charge for attending, although every paid for their own lodging and meals. As a group, we would create an agenda together, offering both small group and large group sessions so that everyone would have the opportunity to explore their particular concerns.

Students valued the retreats so highly that many alumni would continue to attend after having already completed the program. Graduates would work with one another on journal articles, on preparations for promotion and tenure, and on social issues of common interest. In addition, many offered themselves as mentors for newly enrolled students. In turn, many students’ first acquaintance with the program took place during the retreats that they attended as prospective students.

5. Key pedagogical influences, principles, and guidelines

As I trace the evolution of my pedagogical approach, there are a number of teachers, influences, and experiences that I would like to acknowledge, beginning with my first formal teaching experience which took place while I was still in college. As a young foreign student in the United States, an unusual series of events presented me with the opportunity to defray my tuition costs by teaching college Spanish courses at the same institution I was attending. However, it was not until I began teaching high school in Peru that I began to become interested in education as an art and as a practice. My experiences with my high-school students, some of which I have described earlier in this essay, led me to search used book stores for further inspiration.

Some of my most memorable finds included a book by an Argentinian teacher, identified only as Maestro Romualdo, who had published the writings of his students. Another was a series of inspiring books by Celestine Freinet (1986/1969; also 1975/1973 & 1976/1974). Freinet's concept of "the classroom as a publishing house" was a great revelation for me.

A few years later I encountered the work of Paulo Freire (1970, 1982, 1997), whose books were banned at the time in many countries of Latin America. Friends had some mimeographed copies that had been smuggled all the way from Chile. When I read Freire's writing, every word rang true. He was giving voice to the stirrings that had been arising from my own experiences in the classroom. What a gift to find such a teacher to guide the rest of my journey! Yet it was the context of the International Multicultural program, where I arrived a decade after first encountering Freire, that offered me opportunity to explore in much greater depth how these ideals might be put into practice, as I continued to learn and grow as a teacher.

In critical pedagogy our purpose is to support the growth and liberation of all participants. We understand human liberation as the result of praxis; a process of reflection as a preparation for action, followed by reflecting on the results of our action, which leads us to new insights and therefore to new action, in an ongoing cycle of growth and learning. An essential part of that learning is a critical analysis of our own culture. In this area, a major influence has been the *Unlearning Racism* work of Ricky Sherover-Marcuse. It is good to see that the work of this powerful and inspiring teacher is being carried on by many of her students and colleagues, and that her writings are continuing to be published posthumously, both in print and on the internet (1994, 2000).

In the process of working with and mentoring my own students, the memory of two of my own professors and mentors has served me in good stead. I have maintained a nourishing friendship over the years with Dr. Elena Catena, my professor at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid who first recognized my love for literature, challenged me to greater academic rigor, and from then on, has continuously encouraged me to write. Several years later, I had the opportunity as a Radcliffe scholar to attend Dr. Raimundo Lida's courses at Harvard. In the process of transforming my doctoral thesis on the poet Pedro Salinas into a book (1969), Dr. Lida's comments and suggestions were very helpful. The sincere respect with which he approached my work has remained with me all these years as an inspiring example of how to support another person's research.

Outside of a classroom context, another teacher and mentor has been my late long-time editor and friend Bernice Randall, an outstanding model of clarity, precision, and respect for the written text. From her I learned a great deal about the close relationship that must exist between author and reader if they are to walk, hand in hand, toward a meaningful shared understanding.

Over the years, I have come to realize how much I have been influenced by my own family of educators, especially my grandmother Dolores Salvador de Lafuente. I have written about her in "Teacher", one of the vignettes in *Where the Flame Trees Bloom* (1994), as an enduring example of how we must not be afraid to acknowledge the central importance of love and care in the learning process.

From these various sources, along with my own lifetime of praxis, I have distilled the following principles as central to my own philosophy of education:

- As human beings, we need to love and be loved. Therefore we learn better in an environment that offers love and respect, and allows us to experience and honor the truth of our thoughts, emotions and feelings.
- As human beings, we are continually learning and creating meaning from our experience. Therefore we learn better in an environment that allows us to learn at our own pace and in our own way, that honors what we care about, and that builds on what we have already learned from our life experience.
- As human beings, we are vulnerable to and deeply influenced by the hurtful aspects of our society. Racism, as well as other forms of prejudice and oppression such as ageism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism, etc. are pervasive in our world and influence all of us in unconscious ways. Therefore we need to begin by recognizing prejudice and oppression in order to unlearn them.
- As humans, we are social beings. Therefore, we learn better in an interactive, supportive and non-competitive environment. As we live in a competitive society, it takes intention and effort to establish a co-creative atmosphere.
- All cultures deserve respect, and when understood in their fullness, are usually to be admired. At the same time, all cultures contain some elements that need improvement in order to adequately protect universal human rights. To be most effective, this improvement needs to come from within the culture or in partnership with it, rather than imposed upon it.

While it is helpful to become clear about the principles that we hold and upon which we base our practice, the point of education is never to “teach” others to parrot our own values. Instead, our work as educators is to help people reflect on their own experiences and those of others, so that they may freely arrive at their own understandings, beliefs, and values.

In the classroom, as in life, praxis begins with reflection upon our past experience, our history, and our present circumstances, as a preparation for action in the present. Our deliberate and considered action is followed in turn by further reflection. What happened? What was expected, what was predictable, what was new and surprising? What have I learned, and how will that shape and influence the next action that I will take? And so reflection is once again followed by action and the cycle continues, with the goal being the full flowering of human freedom, well-being, and creativity.

Our principles therefore need to be embodied in the various “learning experiences” – readings, classroom dialogues, action research projects-- that we design, assign our students, or invite them to create. In addition, we are also continuously offering students the experience of our example, our own best efforts to live and teach in the light of our principles. The following guidelines have been helpful reminders for me in this ongoing process of creating helpful learning experiences for my students:

1. Engaging in an on-going exploration of how I might best live my pedagogical principles, instead of merely talking about them.
2. Fostering a spirit of trust and openness by looking for ways to respond to new and challenging situations as opportunities for learning, instead of responding from fear or a desire for control.

3. Creating opportunities for each student to engage both in individual work and learning as well as in group work and learning.
4. Investing time and effort in the creation of a community of learners by giving people the opportunity to get to know one another and to understand one another's needs and expectations. This allows everyone to feel included, respected, and supported.
5. Ensuring that the teacher is not the only one who gains from students' knowledge, experience and reflections, by developing structures that allow for the knowledge that is generated or constructed throughout the course to be shared by all.

In exploring these principles and guidelines over the years, I developed a number of classroom practices that served to create an engaged and authentic climate for learning.

6. Classroom practices

The following practices are ones that became an established part of my courses. In some cases, the initial suggestions came from students, including the teaching assistants who contributed greatly to the overall strength of the program.

SELF-PORTRAITS. During the first class session, I would ask students to briefly introduce themselves to the group, and to afterwards complete written questionnaires about themselves. The purpose of the questionnaires was to gather information to share with the entire class. This was explicitly stated, and students were reminded that information that should remain confidential needed to be clearly identified as such.

In addition to basic biographical information, I included more personal questions, such as: Why are you in this course this semester? What would you like to receive from this course (intellectually, academically, socially, personally)? What would you like others in this class to understand and celebrate about you, that most people would not know unless you told them? What would you like to contribute to others in this class? Is there anything else you would like us to know about you?

I would then take the questionnaires home and transcribe them. I realize this could now all be done electronically. Yet for me, typing the handwritten questionnaires became an enjoyable way of developing an internal connection with each student.

At the beginning of the next class, each person would receive a complete set of the self-portraits. If many of the students were new and the size of the class permitted it, I would invite students to re-introduce themselves, and to make additional notes about their classmates on the portraits.

CLASS DIRECTORY. We always found it useful to have a directory with students' names and contact information. Usually one of the students took responsibility for creating it.

WRITTEN REFLECTIONS. Toward the end of each four-hour class session, students were asked to complete a page of anonymous feedback and reflections. They were given a few minutes to answer questions such as: What did I learn today? What was most useful for me? What did other students in the class learn from me today? What questions or concerns do I have now? What would be helpful to me in subsequent classes? What could we do to enrich this class?

At the top of the page, I included a quote from Maturana and Varela on reflection: *“Reflection is a process of knowing how we know. It is an act of turning back upon ourselves. It is the only chance we have to discover our blindness and to recognize that the certainties and knowledge of others are, respectively, as overwhelming and tenuous as our own.”* (1987, p. 24).

These pages were then collected and later transcribed, with all of the various responses to each question grouped together. At the beginning of the following class, each student would receive a copy of the compiled set, and we would allocate class time for reading and discussing the feedback.

The value of this process cannot be overemphasized. In addition to helping students reflect upon their own experience of the class and their own learning process, it also helped surface significant differences in background, preferences, and learning styles among the students. In turn, this led to a greater sense of understanding and connection with one another, and a more authentic feeling of community.

It was often quite illuminating for everyone to see how diverse the answers to the first two questions could be. While everyone had attended the same class, seldom did any two individuals report having learned the same thing, nor having found the same experience most useful. This made it clear to everyone that if each person’s needs were to be addressed, we would need to learn to understand different perspectives. For example, it often was the case that some students would respond: “keep the small group discussions, we need the opportunity to talk among ourselves” while others would request, “please do not waste class time in student discussions, we want to hear from you.”

Initially, when I first began asking students to complete the Class Reflections form, I thought that I was just asking for feedback to allow me to improve the class. Soon, it became apparent that sharing the reflections back with the whole class was a powerful way to generate a greater sense of trust and transparency within the group. It also became a significant learning experience for all of us, as we became more aware of our differences as well as our commonalities.

CLASS CHRONICLE. Every community process is a historical one, and merits being chronicled. While the written feedback at the end of each session provided a record of student responses to what had occurred in class, the class chronicles offered a summary record of the content of class presentations and discussions. In addition, the chronicles provided yet another opportunity for reflection on the learning process.

At the beginning of the semester, students were grouped into teams. Part of each team’s responsibility included chronicling one or two class sessions. Team members took notes and photos, interviewed other students as needed to report on the highlights of the small-group dialogues, and included in the chronicle any relevant information such as student updates, progress reports on projects, recommended readings, etc.

At the beginning of each session, team members distributed an initial draft of the previous session’s chronicle. Students were encouraged to offer comments along with any necessary additions or revisions. As a result, even though the first draft of the chronicle was the product of one team, the final version included the consensus (or if needed the noted dissensions) of the entire class.

Initially, the class chronicles began as a way for students to share the burden of note-taking among themselves. Yet as we began to engage in an evolving process of recording our reflections and experiences together, it became clear that what we were doing was not just note-taking, but “making history”. This, in turn, strengthened the shared sense of being active agents in our own collective learning experience.

CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT. Since history takes place in space as well as in time, it was important for students to take ownership of the space within which their classes took place and to take responsibility for having that space reflect the pedagogy and history of their particular learning community. Frequently tables were moved to form a horse-shoe shape, or chairs were moved to form a circle. Students from each project team would often choose to sit together, so the teams became functional units within the class sessions as well as between sessions.

Students in each course tended to evolve their own meaningful décor for making the space “theirs”. In some courses, students created collages that incorporated photos of everyone in the class. In others, students created symbolic representations of the principles or social issues under discussion, or created posters with meaningful quotes from the assigned readings. In some classes, students chose to have background music during the class session and selected classical music and folk music from various cultures for that purpose.

While enhancing the classroom environment was not usually part of an assigned project, these initiatives often arose naturally as students took greater ownership of their learning process.

CULTURAL OFFERINGS. Each course included both individual assignments and group assignments. One group assignment was specifically designed to facilitate learning about one another’s cultural backgrounds. In addition to the class chronicles, each team was responsible for offering a cultural experience to the rest of their classmates twice during the semester.

This assignment provided an opportunity for a more in-depth exploration of the concept of culture, beyond the more obvious manifestations of food, heroes and holidays to underlying values and worldviews. Of course, food is also important! Since we had long four-hour classes, the team in charge of the cultural sharing was also in charge of bringing edibles to share. This might be dinner for a Friday night class, breakfast for a Saturday morning class, or a snack for Saturday afternoon. While we greatly appreciated the food, and welcomed hearing about what these particular dishes represented within their culture or their family, we also insisted that the cultural sharing go beyond food.

Another helpful learning opportunity took place whenever students, typically from the dominant culture, expressed their concern that they had no culture to share. This provided an opportunity to explore the difficult yet essential concept of ethnocentrism, or how one’s own culture can become invisible and unquestioned whenever it is assumed to be the “norm”.

JOURNALING. Students were encouraged to keep journals as an individual and private activity. This was the only writing assignment that was designed for the faculty’s eyes only. I must confess that having myself been remiss at keeping journals, I initially

embraced this activity with some hesitation, and only at the suggestion of an enthusiastic teaching assistant. Yet the positive results that so many students experienced with this process convinced me of its value, and I ended up including it as a regular part of my course assignments.

I found the journals to be as varied as the students. Some were written quickly, with just one thought to synthesize the day, while others were lengthy reflections. Some journals were poetic, others factual. Some students chose to focus on the ups and downs of their daily lives, while others emphasized their intellectual journey. I found them all to be rich and fascinating... and for students who were engaged in participatory research, their journals often became an important research tool and source of information.

INDIVIDUAL CLASS PROJECTS AND GROUP SYNTHESIS. In each class, students were expected to carry out a substantial individual project. These individual projects were also shared with the class, with the help of the various teams. In fact, the task of synthesizing the individual projects and sharing the results with the class was the primary task that students carried out in their teams, and by far the most challenging one.

In each course, the individual project assignment was divided into several sections (usually between four and six) which corresponded roughly to the number of teams in the class. Each class session, a different section of the project was due. Students were asked to bring several copies of their work: one for the professor, one for each teaching assistant, and one for each member of the team whose turn it was to synthesize the individual project section due that week.

Since every student in the class was on a team, this meant that each student, in addition to:

- completing his or her own individual project over the course of the semester;
- also:
- read at least one section of each of his or her classmates' projects, as part of a synthesizing team;
 - engaged in the challenge of creating, as a team, a written analysis and synthesis of all class members' work on that particular project section;
 - developed, as a team, an informative and artistic presentation to share with the class regarding the project section that the team had read, analyzed, and synthesized.

Students generally found this group synthesis to be quite a challenging project. Often, it was the most difficult project they had yet encountered in their academic careers. In some courses, each individual project had a similar theme (for example, "democracy and education", or "first-language maintenance", or "the transmission of cultural heritage") yet each student was working with a unique population that had its own particular characteristics. In other courses, each student project had a different theme, yet the synthesizing team still needed to create a coherent framework and present common threads as well as differences.

While challenging, the process of analyzing the work of their classmates in search of similarities and differences was an extremely valuable opportunity for students to expand their own perspectives. In addition, this kind of reflection and critical thinking helped prepare students to later create a very substantial "review of the literature" section for their own dissertations.

Each team presented, at a later session, the synthesis they had created. This gave the rest of the students the opportunity to learn about the various approaches that others in the class were taking with regard to their individual projects. In turn, this created an opportunity for students to reflect further on their own projects and continue to improve upon them.

7. In conclusion

I have sought to briefly describe here some of the principles and practices I have developed over a lifetime of learning alongside my students. They have been the ones who have continuously informed, challenged, and inspired me with their authenticity, their commitment, their dedication, and their hope.

One recurring thread in our work together has been the theme of gratefulness. My students and I have often reflected on the privilege implied by being able to sit and dialogue, to read and write, while so many human beings are struggling to obtain enough food to stay alive, clean water to drink, or a place to rest. I believe that this recognition of our privilege strengthened our sense of responsibility, yet it did not diminish the joy that we found in our work together.

I cannot remember a teaching weekend that was untouched by a sense of anticipation and wonder. I knew that each time, I would emerge at the end of a very intense couple of days, filled with a wealth of experiences, reflections, and ideas, enriched by the experience of having connected deeply with others, of having truly lived that which Freire used to describe as “the Joouoooy of Learning”, drawing out the words to emphasize how fully he savored the experience...

This was a learning so active and alive that it could never be contained within the pages of a book; instead, it was being born and evolving with each word, through each pause, in each moment of silence, in the courage of speaking our truth, acknowledging our doubts and our uncertainties, recognizing our limitations... in each moment of determining to nonetheless continue on, in the unending journey toward realizing our ideals of freedom, well-being, and justice for all -- an unreachable goal maybe, yet certainly one that allows us to tap into the limitless energy of our deepest convictions.

I will always be grateful to you, my students, for what we were able to create together. May your own journeys be filled with the joy of on-going discovery, as you carry on with the larger work of teaching, learning, and growing.

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