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# An Approach To Understanding Through Practice: Contextual Analysis Of A High School--College Latina/o And Latin American Studies Collaborative Program

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An Approach to Understanding through Practice:  
Contextual Analysis of a High School--College Latina/o and Latin American Studies  
Collaborative Program

by

Gabriel Antonio Higuera

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## Abstract

AN APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING THROUGH PRACTICE:  
CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF A HIGH SCHOOL—COLLEGE LATINA/O AND LATIN  
AMERICAN STUDIES COLLABORATIVE PROGRAM

by

Gabriel Antonio Higuera

Advisor: Professor Hector Cordero-Guzmán

Collaborative, interdisciplinary, multigenerational, and culturally-rooted educational programs benefit students of historically marginalized groups in the United States. This paper employs critical race theory (CRT) as a means to better understand the greater dynamics undergirding the achievement gap. CRT also serves as a basis for the narrative description of the high school–college collaborative program I created and developed in Phoenix, Arizona, from 2002 to 2006. The program model features 2-year and 4-year college students co-facilitating dialogues on Latina/o and Latin American Studies at participating high schools. Collaborative program structures are analyzed with a focus on their ability to invite community input (Nuñez and Oliva, 2009). I assess how multi-tiered, culturally relevant, collaborative programming at the local level provides support for both secondary and post-secondary students, which I argue, serves to strengthen communities.

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## Introduction

....origin stories shape not only our sense of the past; they shape how we experience the present and imagine the future (Carbado, 2011, p. 1597).

The principal at Carl Hayden High School agreed to pilot a Latina/o and Latin American Studies after-school program I had developed as an undergraduate college student. One late summer morning of 2002, a week before I was to begin teaching, I decided to drive around the school's surrounding neighborhood. I soon noticed a police car following me, and after several minutes of winding through the working-class, largely Hispanic area of west-central Phoenix, the lights and sirens were turned on, and I pulled over to the side of the road. Looking in the rear-view mirror, I saw not one, but four police cars, which by that time had fanned out across the street, blocking all traffic. They opened their doors, and crouching down from behind them, they pointed their guns at me. Their orders were yelled, "Get outta the car! Get your hands in the air....Turn around! Sidestep to the middle of the street! Lace your fingers together - behind your head! Kneel! Get on your knees!"

There I was with six guns pointed at my back, a block away from the high school where I was to begin teaching for the first time. A few of the officers rushed me from behind, grabbed me, handcuffed me, searched me, and detained me in the back of one of the police cars. Then

they searched my car. I had a copy of Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* on the passenger's seat and Phoenix Union High School District push-out statistics in the back. Eventually I was let out of the police car and the handcuffs were removed. The officer told me that they had incorrectly typed in my license plate number into their computer, and that the incorrect number happened to be one of a stolen car - hence the mix-up. Another police officer joked, "We owe you a beer." I do not believe a typographical error was the cause of the stop. I believe I was profiled for being young, Latino, and driving.

Once I was free, I ran back to my car and grabbed my camera. The image shown here was the first I took, standing near the spot where I had just been kneeling before a firing squad. I completed a walk



around the scene snapping photos amid taunts from the officers of "Smile for the camera," and "Say 'Cheese'." One neighbor came to the edge of his front yard and asked me, bewildered, "What's going on? Is this a drill?" I responded, "No. They just nearly killed me." I felt that since they almost took my life, the least I could take of theirs were their pictures. By doing so, I briefly reclaimed that street and interrupted their spectacle of power. I made it back to my car, opened the door, and sat down. I turned the key, starting the engine, and the first lyrics which played from the tape-deck went "Until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned, everywhere is war,"<sup>1</sup> and I slowly drove away.

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Marley and the Wailers. "War." Rastaman Vibration. Island Records, 1976.



## **One**

### **Theoretical Underpinnings of the Tertulia Resolana:**

#### **High School ~ College ~ Community Collaborative**

Collaborative, interdisciplinary, multigenerational, and culturally-rooted educational programs work toward building community, celebrating diversity, and elevating academic expectations and achievement. Collaborative program models in education, particularly those that link high school with college, bring institutions together, and have the potential to create “third spaces” (Nuñez and Oliva, 2009, p. 332) where institutional boundaries are replaced with bridges, and the sites of academic attrition can transform into sites of healing, caring and love. The true value of these partnerships is located in the immeasurable connection between and among adults and students who, although at varying stages in their academic trajectories, share the mutual goals of enhancing the quality of life for present and future generations. Such transformative collaborations require what Collins et al. refer to as “constant gardening” (p. 394), as they operate within a socio-economic, political, and epistemological order hostile toward rearrangements that empower historically marginalized populations.

Understanding the achievement gap in high school and college retention and graduation rates between Hispanic students and white students in the United States has as much to do with

socio-economic factors as it does with what is happening within the schools themselves. Research has shown that culturally relevant curricula have a positive impact in the educational outcomes of historically marginalized people (Sleeter, 2011) while civic participation and community involvement have also shown to be of benefit to high school and college youth of color (Cammarota and Fine, 2008). Collaborative programming at the micro level has the power to positively impact both the academic trajectories and lives of all involved. At the macro level, the theoretical concept of collaborative programming for social change can positively influence institutions through a reorientation of how community needs are transparently articulated and addressed through means and systems that do not reproduce or perpetuate disparate outcomes in academic achievement.

Both culturally relevant curriculum and community involvement were at the root of the collaborative program I developed, taught, and directed as an undergraduate college student in Phoenix, Arizona, from 2002 to 2006. The program, *Tertulia Resolana: High School~College~Community Collaborative*, paired college students with community college students who then co-facilitated weekly lessons on Latin American and Latino Studies at participating high schools. The high school students each wrote a research paper on a topic relating to the interdisciplinary study of the Americas. Throughout the duration of the collaboration, the participating high school students were encouraged to utilize the cultural and civic organizations within their communities as resources, while artists, activists and other community leaders were invited to share their experiences within the classrooms.

In this section, I set out to discuss the theoretical underpinnings of the *Tertulia Resolana*, beginning with the significance of the name of the program itself. In Spanish, a *tertulia* is an informal gathering akin to the French *salon* in which a group of people regularly meet to discuss

the issues of the day ranging from politics to literature, while also tending to matters of lesser significance. I appropriated the term *tertulia* for this program because I was interested in creating a space where group discussion was at the center, making sustained engagement and participation the goal. The second term, *Resolana*, originated in New Mexico in the 1960's and 1970's, and was developed by educators and community leaders Tomas Atencio, Miguel Montiel, and Tony Mares. Their interest was to reflect the idea of communities gathering and sharing knowledge, warmth, time, and space (Atencio, 1988; Montiel, et al, 2009). The name of the program, *Tertulia Resolana*, doubly reinforced the notion of dialogical learning. The objective of listening, sharing, and being together, rather than memorizing and repeating, allowed for a reorientation of the source of knowledge, and valued the community as an epistemological center. The concept of *Resolana* was powerful because it placed historically marginalized groups at the forefront of the production of knowledge, in contrast to the pervasive Eurocentric approach to American education. Atencio (1988) writes,

The need for Resolana became evident during the Civil Rights Movement when Chicanos demanded access to educational opportunities. We became aware, however, that although the established educational system could impart skills and scientific knowledge, it did not have a humanistic body of knowledge contexted within our culture and experience. Moreover, Chicanos, in our search for indigenous roots, appropriated Indian identity; it offered us an alternative world view and different epistemological foundations and therefore another way of understanding human experience (p. 2).

Latin American and Latino Studies provide learning and dialogical spaces in which the realities of a marginalized population can be approached unencumbered by the standardized narrative of American Exceptionalism, where cultural chauvinism domestically has gone hand-

in-hand with U.S. hegemony abroad (Gonzalez, 2000). For example, the arrival of millions of Latinos into the United States can be largely attributed to U.S. economic, political, and military involvement in the Americas. This history is absent from the standard k-12 curriculum even in regions with large Latino student populations. The process by which these truths are taught must be considered nothing short of a movement toward healing, unbound by borders or hegemonic notions of nationalism.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a useful tool in unraveling the interconnected legacy of legally institutionalized racism and the stagnant educational position of Latinos. Latino Studies seeks to employ interdisciplinary means to better understand the Hispanic experience in the United States, and this pursuit is incomplete without taking into account how this diverse population has been reflected in legislation through time. If racism was built into the framing of our sociopolitical system (Carbado, 2011), then when was it removed? The Supreme Court decision in *Plessey v. Ferguson* in 1896 legitimized a social order of “separate but equal,” and although the ruling was challenged in *Mendez v. Westminster* in 1946, and overturned by *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the social order remained. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 gave the impression that barriers to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” were finally and truly falling, leading some to argue that we have, borrowing a word from the gospel song, *overcome*. The twice-elected black president signaled to many people that the U.S. is a post-racial society. The 2013 Supreme Court ruling in *Shelby County v. Holder*, for example, notes that the nation has made sufficient strides in ending discrimination and disenfranchisement of minorities, so much so that it struck down a major provision of the 1965 Voting Rights Act (Provision 4[b], requiring federal preclearance prior to a state’s intention of changing voting laws). State level affirmative action laws are being challenged across the

country as well under the argument that their purpose has been served in granting minority populations a boost in accessing education and employment. But have we really *overcome*?

As a form of oppositional scholarship, critical race theory challenges the universality of white experience/judgment as the authoritative standard that binds people of color and normatively measures, directs, controls, and regulates the terms of proper thought, expression, presentation, and behavior. As represented by legal scholars, critical race theory challenges the dominant discourses on race and racism as they relate to law. The task is to identify values and norms that have been disguised and subordinated in the law. As critical race scholars, we thus seek to demonstrate that our experiences as people of color are legitimate, appropriate, and effective bases for analyzing the legal system and racial subordination (Calmore, 1992, pp. 2161-2162).

Some scholars who come from historically excluded groups share critical resistance by “talking back” to the *official* story and the *official* perspective by participating in and contributing to the narratives of history (Hooks, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Smith, 2012). In the context of present social science scholarship, many academics have taken to addressing their ties to the object of research and articulating their location and perspective in a sociopolitical, cultural, and economic context. W.E.B. DuBois, in his seminal 1903 work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, gives an early example of this when he notes in his introduction that he writes from “behind the veil”, cluing the reader to the fact that he is black. In that vein, I introduce this thesis with a personally-lived experience of injustice in the United States at the dawn of the 21st century as a reminder that we do not practice our craft as educators in a vacuum, and that the forces which drive inequality are still guarded by the threat and use of state-sanctioned violence particularly trained on Latinos and African Americans (Alexander, 2010).

CRT serves the function of locating law, race, and narrative as a point of convergence from which new scholarship may emerge. The legal and educational systems in the U.S. were founded on the inferiority paradigm which maintained that African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, and other people of color were intellectually inferior to Anglos (Tate, 1997; Carter and Goodwin, 1994). Through the cultural deficit model, blame for “underachievement” was rarely placed on the structures responsible for disparities in education and access (Kirk and Goon, 1975; Meacham, 2001; Holguín Cuádriz, 2006). Scholars employ CRT to address the entrenched legacy of racist intellectual endeavor by purposefully constructing narratives that regard the status of justice and equality as issues affecting all members of society. The centuries of accumulated policy and practice of codified racism continue to play out in daily life. CRT is useful also in bridging the theoretical gaps between the diversity of historically oppressed populations.<sup>2</sup>

Threat narratives are tools intended to drive wedges between populations and can seep into the inner workings of individuals’ self-perceptions. W.E.B. DuBois’ language of *double consciousness* speaks to his experience of navigating through society both as a citizen and as a black man in America at the beginning of the 20th century. His understanding of the power of narrative form is utilized to make plain the impossibility of African Americans to measure up to the standard of the model citizen as enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. DuBois goes on to ask, rhetorically, “How does it feel to be a problem?” The question is reflective of a language that has for many groups served as an alienating identifier –to be *a problem*. The demoralizing language continuously arises throughout American history. “In 1970, Evelina

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<sup>2</sup> Among the criticisms of CRT is that because the notion of *race* is foundational to its claims of injustice in the United States, the theoretical work does not sufficiently locate class and gender as equally significant sites of injustice as analyzed in feminist and Marxist critiques of the political economic system.

Lopez Antonetty, the founder of United Bronx Parents, in testimony before a U.S. Congress Select Committee on Equal Educational Opportunity for Puerto Rican Children, argued ‘The problem is not our Puerto Rican children. The problem is a system of education that squeezes and manipulates and destroys our children’” (De Jesus and Perez, 2009, p. 11).

Culturally-rooted education programs such as the Tertulia Resolana employ counter-narratives to humanize people who are seen as the problem—people often excluded and hidden from the public eye, for example the very individuals who harvest the food consumed in the U.S. The literary and scholarly production of former field hands, such as Tomas Rivera, Ernesto Galarza, and Gloria Anzaldua, each of whom became university professors (and in the case of Dr. Rivera, a university president), bears witness to the hardship endured by immigrant and migrant farm workers from the perspective of the insider. Their most recognized works, ...*Y no se lo tragó la tierra* (Rivera, 1971), *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story* (Galarza 1964), *Barrio Boy* (Galarza, 1971), and *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Anzaldua,1987) stand in contradiction to the dehumanizing rhetoric propagated through mass media that, whenever convenient, seeks to blame the monolithic Latino population for the woes of the nation. What’s more, their writings transcend the literal field and continue to have an impact in the fields of literary criticism, labor studies, feminist studies, gay and lesbian studies, and Chicana/o studies, to name a few.

Hispanics as a whole have shouldered the physical, economic, and psychological violence that accompanies the construction of this population as a threat to the American narrative. The essential role which undocumented workers have long played in the domestic economy is only recognized at times of economic recession, when it is demonized by xenophobic, anti-Latino, and anti-immigrant popular sentiment and legislation. This was seen

after the market collapse in 2007, as candidates seeking elected office found success in stoking the dormant embers of overt racism and playing into people's fears that immigrants were both taking the jobs of Americans, and also were effectively altering European-American culture. Exasperating people's irrational fears facilitates the mistreatment and dehumanization of the undocumented in society as well as those who are associated with the undocumented population.

Arizona was one such state where legislation was passed to curb both illegal immigration (State Law 1070), as well as outlawing ethnic studies at the k-12 level, requiring the Tucson Unified High School District to dismantle their comprehensive Mexican American Studies program. Copycat legislation ensued in other states, such as South Carolina, which according to the U.S. Census, is the state with the fastest-growing Latino population in the country. The legal construction of groups of people with limited rights, or no rights at all, is a form of violence which permeates social interactions and institutional behaviors. Here, CRT intersects with the work of philosophers such as Gramsci, Foucault, Debord, and Spivak in their discussions of cultural hegemony and imperial violence. Foucault (1975) and Debord (1967), through analyses ranging from mass media to corporal and state-sanctioned violence, have influenced philosophers including Gayatri Spivak, who asks, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Spivak, 1988). Embedded in this question are deeper ideas of positionality, i.e., insider/outsider, center/periphery, and subject/object. Spivak, like DuBois, challenges the reader to see narratives from the margins as valid while simultaneously charging Eurocentric institutions of learning with the perpetuation of cultural imperialism.

For Latinos/as, [...] ideologically coded language and language-based racism has had the effect of licensing institutional discrimination, whereby both documented and undocumented immigrants materially experience the loss of their dignity, the denial of



their humanity, and, in many cases, outright violence [...] (p. 225). Language such as “wetback,” “illegal aliens,” and “non-white hordes” that is used by the popular press not only dehumanizes other cultural beings, but also serves to justify the violence perpetuated against subordinate groups (Bartolome and Macedo, 1997, p. 225).

The social architecture which persistently marginalizes youth of color can be seen as a violent arrangement in both theory and practice. Physical, psychological, and epistemological violence is mandated by law, enforced by institutions, and marketed in an ever-more consolidated aesthetic through mass media. The physical violence of the present socio-political arrangement is manifest in how and where communities are policed and is reflected in our dubious distinction of world leader in the incarceration of people, the disproportionate majority of whom are Black and Latino (Alexander, 2010). In New York City, for example, the 2010 Census reported that 55% of the city’s population was African American and Latino, while 91% of those admitted to city correctional facilities were people of color (Klevan et al, 2013). Sanctioned violence and injustice historically and presently inflicted upon groups based on race, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity and national origin is perpetrated on a spectrum from loosely-veiled to lethal. Pauline Lipman writes,

Ideologically, the security state is buttressed by viciously racist and patriarchal images of the “urban” as danger zone and working-class people of color as the undeserving poor (Katz, 1989) who need social discipline. Regulation, containment, and criminalization of youth of color are warranted by their construction as pathological and irresponsible. Instead of resources and support, they get military high schools, surveillance, regimented curricula, and the policing of their bodies” (2008, p. 127).

Nearly 50 million Americans live in poverty according to the U.S. 2012 Census Bureau report. The lived experiences of these families are not interrogated, analyzed, or challenged by institutions; they are products of institutions. Americans in low-income areas are hyper-policed, held suspect, and presumed guilty. Black and Hispanic youth bear the brunt of this unjust reality (Alexander, 2010). Pedro Noguera writes, "...poor children encounter obstacles that often adversely affect their development and learning outcomes. To ignore this reality and make bold assertions that all children can achieve while doing nothing to address the outside-of-school challenges they face is neither fair nor a sound basis for developing public policy" (Noguera, 2011). In order to close the achievement gap, it is necessary to close the "opportunity gap" (Villavivencio, et al, 2013) of unequal access to human services such as housing and health care for students and gainful employment for their families in the United States. Public education in the U.S., however, pays scant attention to the external needs of their most vulnerable populations.

What, then, is the role of public education at the macroeconomic level in American society? Horace Mann, among the early public figures in the development of the American educational system in the mid-19th century, wrote that "Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery" (Mann, 1848). Mann's ideas of equality and the role of education, as expressed in the 1840's, resonated throughout the young nation still defining itself. Many still believe that our public education system is "the great equalizer." However, the data says otherwise. The achievement gap (in both high school and college performance) persists largely because of external factors, the most prominent of which is socioeconomic status (Bowels and Gintis, 2002; Noguera 2004; Villavivencio, et al, 2013). While support for public education

remains a central talking point for elected officials and public figures, many scholars and activists view its present function as a site of social reproduction without critical intervention and real change. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis' seminal 1976 work, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, provides a framework for a better understanding of the relationship between the system of public education and the machinations of capitalism. They write,

First schooling produces many of the technical and cognitive skills required for adequate job performance. Second, the educational system helps legitimize economic inequality [...] (T)he objective and meritocratic orientation of U.S. education reduces discontent over both the hierarchical division of labor and the process through which individuals attain position in it. Third, the school produces, rewards, and labels personal characteristics relevant to the staffing positions in the hierarchy. Fourth, the educational system, through the pattern of status distinctions it fosters, reinforces the stratified consciousness on which the fragmentation of subordinate economic classes is based (1976; 2011, p. 129).

Students in the U.S. educational system are conditioned to accept inequality and to rationalize placing blame on those at the bottom for not working hard enough (Oakes, 2005). The "stratified consciousness" of youth is developed and fostered by schools at the expense of community, student solidarity, and belief systems that put the group at the center, rather than the individual. Educator Paolo Freire (1993) has been influential in addressing the systematic fragmentation of populations by means of controlling access to learning opportunities and in seeking ways in which the stunted creativity and imagination could be reawakened through *conscientization* and critical analysis of the world in which students live. Much of Freire's work is a call to action for all sectors of society, from the beneficiaries of privilege to those excluded

from the wealth they create for the dominant class. The term *consciousness* links the work of DuBois, Freire, and, as seen in the excerpt below, Bowels and Gintis:

Youth of different racial, sexual, ethnic, or economic characteristics directly perceive the economic positions and prerogatives of “their kind of people.” By adjusting their aspiration accordingly, they not only reproduce stratification on the level of personal consciousness, but bring their needs into (at least partial) harmony with the fragmented conditions of economic life (2011, p. 128).

The spectacle of violence in the United States is used to maintain divisions of class and race and its suite of manifestations constantly conspires to suppress contestation. The psychological violence inherent in the structure and execution of public education, in conjunction with physical violence rampant in society, renders generations of students defenseless and with limited recourse. Should youth adjust their aspirations? What is the recommended age for a student to make the transition from dreaming of a future without limits, to the preparation for a life of limited options?

The youth who inherit a socio-economic head-start are also victims of the *hidden curriculum* (Snyder, 1970; Martinson, 2003) which numbs creativity and critical thinking through unequal power dynamics and disconnecting the relationship between reality and what is learned in school. They are simultaneously made to feel both deserving of their status by differentiating them and separating them from their lower income peers. This difference and separation, established early on in the course of a student’s academic trajectory, lays the groundwork for a distorted perspective on her/his place in society in relation to others.

Culturally relevant and collaborative programs, such as the Tertulia Resolana program model (detailed in the following section), explicitly and implicitly resist the institutional pressures weighing on working-class communities of color. The interdisciplinary nature of Ethnic Studies in the U.S. provides an entry point for participants to engage in dialogues rooted in the histories and cultures of historically marginalized groups. Issues of alienation are diminished by building on the strengths and prior knowledge of participants (cultural capital), leading to opportunities for deeper learning and comprehension of their reality. The learning process ideally inspires not only an understanding, but also a desire to participate in the civic and cultural life of one's community. Meanwhile, a reinvigorated community plays a more active and engaged role in the life and culture of the school. "[...]students must be given the opportunity to recognize a broader conception of learning, one that represents a continuum of interactions and processes that overcome the distinctions between classroom versus non-classroom, intellectual versus manual and emotional, and curricular versus extra-curricular" (Giroux, 1978, p. 150). Local, regional, and national collaborative learning partnerships can and should leverage resources, build and share knowledge, integrate and ingratiate themselves into the micro and macro dynamics of decision making and problem solving through multigenerational participatory action research (Cammarota and Fine, 2008). Collaborative learning in the context of culturally relevant curriculum fosters leadership firmly rooted in the context of community. As collaborative processes spiral outward, opportunities arise for scalable action in which a more empowered, inspired, and confident student body can share actionable knowledge with their community and affect positive social change.

## **Two**

### **Building a Multi-Institutional and Culturally Relevant Collaborative**

#### **Educational Program**

Naming the world from my historical and cultural experience became my vocation. Personal experience and education provided the tools for work toward that goal (Atencio, 1988, p. 3).

In this section I will describe and analyze how, as a young person, I became interested in Latin American and Latino studies, which led me to develop the Tertulia Resolana program in Arizona from 2002 to 2006. The narrative approach to this section is informed by critical race theory and the scholarship of counter-narratives. By telling the story of how this program came into being, I wish to provide information to the reader on ways in which alternative educational programs can emerge. My intention is to also relate how the process of developing and implementing the Tertulia Resolana High School ~ College ~ Community Collaborative transformed my life. Setting aside the theory for now, what follows is a narrative description of my experience as a young, second generation Latino, choosing to offer an alternative way of challenging the systems that reproduce inequality.

School was a struggle for me. The reality of my lived experience as a child of immigrant parents was never reflected in the curriculum. Although I grew up in the border state of Arizona, Mexico was absent from any formal classroom study. The silence regarding Latin American and Latina/o histories and cultures grew louder as I got older. I began to pay more attention to these omissions from the text books, and eventually began to make the connections between the absence of positive discussion and the presence of negative portrayals of my culture. I grew frustrated with my formal schooling and replaced it largely with independent reading on the stories not being told in the classroom. We did not discuss in high school the legacy of centuries of slavery, despite learning the names of some individuals who righted the wrongs of America, such as Rosa Parks and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I was fortunate to have graduated from high school without delays, but the experience with formal schooling had taken its toll. Going to college did not excite me, especially if it meant more of the same uncritical and conveyor-belt acceptance of the status quo.

The first time I got excited about school was when I spotted class offerings such as “Latin American Politics” and “Mexican Muralism” in the college catalog. The absence of the Americas from my formal K-12 schooling was so complete that I was nearly made to believe that Latin America was not worthy of existing in a textbook. I knew this was not true when I had the privilege to stand atop the Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacan as an 11-year-old. I then understood at a deep and personal level the richness of my history. When given an opportunity a decade later to learn, I was eager to begin studying the Americas.

While college offered courses which motivated me to go to class, I had difficulties with the obligations of prerequisite coursework and the pedagogical approaches that resembled those of my high school teachers. I became more a student of my imagination, following a thread of

inquiry into the workings of the society in which I lived. This path led me to read Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society*. These books stood in contrast to the required readings because they addressed the relationships between ideologies, cultures, institutions, and power. I did not continuously attend college. Instead, I worked, read, saved, and when possible, I travelled. As I reflected on the difficulty I had during my high school and early college years, I began to think of ways in which I could combine my cultural studies classes and intellectual passions with my work as an activist and community organizer.

My idea was to develop an interdisciplinary course on Chicana/o and Latin American Studies for Phoenix area high school students. I researched the course offerings of all Phoenix area public high schools and found that none offered Chicano, Latino, or Latin American Studies despite Phoenix Union High School District's student body being over 70% Hispanic in 2002. I had not read the research on the effectiveness of culturally relevant curriculum at the time, but it just made sense to me that students would be more engaged in readings and discussions if the course material respectfully reflected their histories. I drew from my personal experience of cultural alienation in my k-12 schooling, and remembered how the study of the Americas kept me from dropping out of college. I was sure that, at the very least, a high school program that focused on Latina/o and Latin American histories and cultures would help younger students understand and appreciate where their neighbors and/or families came from.

The plan was to get the support of the Center for Latin American Studies at Arizona State University, where I had already established a positive relationship with the staff and leadership. Then, I would take the program to the high schools. First, I had to develop the program itself on paper – its goals, structure, and curriculum. For six months I met with professors, examined



curricula, explored teaching resources and lesson plans, and assembled an advisory board, which led to the development of an interdisciplinary, year-long curriculum. I decided to base the program on a human rights approach, which begins with clearly discussing our shared, universal rights, regardless of any other distinctions. I also wanted an interdisciplinary curriculum based on learning and sharing information and observations on the cultures and histories of the Americas. I was inspired by Howard Gardner's *Multiple Intelligences* and worked toward ensuring that curriculum delivery encompassed audio, visual, literary, kinesthetic, and even gastronomic elements serving as foundations for dialogue.

I then met with the director and staff of the Center for Latin American Studies, and proposed the program as an addition to their community outreach. At that time, the Center's engagement with the community was limited to website resources for teachers and a speaker series. The program I was offering to be housed in the Center would be a more meaningful bridge to the greater community. The meeting concluded with the Center offering their support of the Tertulia Resolana program I had developed. They agreed to serve as institutional host, and although I was not paid, I was permitted to move forward with the institutional support of the Center for Latin American Studies.

I created program material with the logo of the Center for Latin American Studies and began identifying and contacting schools for potential partnerships. I used statistical analysis of the Phoenix Union High School District to determine which campuses would stand to gain most from hosting the program. I looked at a variety of indicators, including total student body numbers, breakdowns of race, student to teacher ratios, numbers of extra-curricular activities offered, and graduation rates. The first school that opened their doors to the collaboration was Carl Hayden High School. The principal was very supportive and offered the use of the library as

the meeting space for weekly, 90 minute after-school meetings. With those conditions set, I contacted teachers to promote the program and passed out flyers to students during the campus lunch hour.

On the inaugural day, two students attended, along with the school principal and vice principal. We sat around a circular table where we introduced ourselves, briefly talked about our expectations of the program. Then we took turns reading aloud Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzalez’ poem, *I am Joaquin* (1967). We sat together, multiple generations of Latinos in varying stages of our lives, sharing culture, personal experiences, and time. Those meetings lasted the entire school year, attended by two to five students, and frequently visited by teachers and school staff. We read and discussed essays, poems, current events articles, analyzed film and art, and spoke of political and economic watershed moments and their relationship with the Hispanic experience in different regions of the United States. The voluntary after-school model granted me the opportunity and time to further develop lesson plans and collect resources, while working with students equally committed and interested in participating. I had never taught before, so this small-scale setting allowed me to get attuned to the world of teaching and working with the high school student population.

I began to consider ways in which the model could expand and incorporate more voices and reach more students. Further reflection and research pushed me to speak with more principals and teachers about the possibility of having the Tertulia Resolana featured as a weekly addition to a pre-existing class. For the following three years, the program functioned as an in-school weekly addition to ESL and social studies classes with captive audiences of students. The goal was to reach as many youth as possible, especially those whose disengagement was threatening their prospects of graduating.

I continued teaching the program at high schools in Phoenix as an undergrad representing the Center for Latin American Studies. I became so involved in the work that I neglected my college coursework and was eventually expelled from the university for poor academic performance. I had no alternative but to take courses at one of the Maricopa Community Colleges to prove to the university that I was capable and ready to return, which I eventually did. My experience at the community college broadened my perspective on understanding and interpreting ways in which collaborative models of teaching and learning could benefit students at multiple stages in academia.

I redesigned the Tertulia Resolana program model while still taking courses at the community college. Through conversations with principals and high school teachers, I was able to generate greater interest in the program. I recruited undergraduate and graduate students from Arizona State University and from the Maricopa Community College system to co-facilitate the Tertulia Resolana in pairs at participating high schools. College students at varying places in their academic careers participated in professional development, gained teaching experience, and expanded their networks throughout various learning institutions. The program was successful in that it lasted five years, served six high schools, and provided training and teaching experiences for a cohort of college, community college, and graduate students.

“Programs often start with activities that [...] leaders or staff members believe will work. Later, when consulting with evaluators, leaders may reflect on their implicit theories behind these activities as they seek tools to measure inputs and outcomes” (Moran et al, 2009, p.346). I began the Tertulia Resolana program because I thought it was necessary. I was not sure that it would work, but I believed that the youth of my community were being underserved and ultimately disrespected through the absence of their stories from formal study. My informal and

out-of-school reading and work experiences granted me the opportunity to creatively analyze and interpret the lived experiences of the majority of public high school students in Phoenix. I gained the courage and tools to question, interrupt, and implement an alternative to the reproduction of inequality in the field of education.

The Tertulia Resolana program was not institutionalized for several reasons. Sustainability was impossible as the entire program was unfunded and staffed by volunteers. Initially, the absence of funding constraints provided an incubation period that allowed for experimentation and organic expansion. I knew program continuity would require funding, extensive support from the community, and from the institutions involved. Although the Center for Latin American Studies officially sponsored the program, their encouragement did not extend into dialogues on how to fund the program. I was supporting myself by working odd jobs, and once I received my undergrad degree, I took a full-time job teaching at a high school. In 2006, I put the Tertulia Resolana program on the shelf.

## **Three**

### **Processes and Benefits of Collaborative Programs**

Recent research on collaborative efforts in education, particularly between high schools, colleges, and universities, helps clarify the opportunities and challenges in bridging institutional gaps. This section analyzes some of the essential components of educational partnerships through a review of the literature, which provides a better framework for understanding the potential benefits of the Tertulia Resolana program model. The study of successful collaborative projects is relevant, both in human and in economic terms, for a better understanding of the roles of stakeholders and the nature of how relationships develop over time. When organizations work well together, new spaces emerge from the interstices between them. These “third spaces” (Nuñez and Oliva, 2009, p. 332) challenge notions of hierarchy, organizational structure, and ultimately, organizational identity by forcing institutions to be more dynamic and build coalitions across issues. Collaborations require organizations to step out of their niches and nurture the benefits arising from the unintended consequences of working together. Leaders of strong collaborations who allow for change see the bigger picture and work justly towards establishing healthy, regenerative processes, creating an environment where outcomes often transcend the original stated objectives. An ideal collaboration communicates to clarity of tasks

and cultivates new leadership while carefully observing and fostering the development of integrative modes of completing objectives (Collins, et al., 2009, p. 401).

Organizations do not work seamlessly together, as communication and trust is essential for complex collaborations to be successful. The level of activity required to maintain quality collaborations demands precise articulation of objectives, goals, intention, and resources, as well as clear outlines of how specific objectives are to be met. The work entails heightened anticipation of needs and support from participating organizations. The maintenance of educational partnerships requires regimented attention, or as Collins et al. more eco-consciously put it, “*constant gardening*” (p. 394).

Analysis of the shared characteristics found among successful collaborations is useful for educators, activists, administrators, and policy makers involved in partnership design. The October 2009 issue of the Journal of Hispanic Higher Education discusses P-20 (preschool to graduate school) partnerships in their myriad applications. The following chart discusses the conditions and supports necessary for multi-institutional collaborations and recommendations for sustainability (Nuñez and Oliva, 2009, p. 334).

**Conditions and Supports for Success**

- Trust among stakeholders
- Communication between stakeholders
- Targeted financial resources
- Human resources (including personnel dedicated to partnership)

**Recommendations for Action**

- Create shared cultural norms and goals
- Situate collaboration in local conditions
- Avoid “one-size-fits-all” approach
- Support broad “education” mission to promote public good and P-20 advancement/success

Nuñez and Oliva clearly present the complexities involved in collaborations. Trust and communication are essential among the partnering institutions and individuals. Financial and human resources are equally important, but are irrelevant without the commitment of

stakeholders. Recommendations for action are anchored in reflecting the shared goals of participating institutions and the particular environment. The action items are both proactive as well as preventative.

Nuñez and Oliva precisely articulate the challenges and barriers to true and meaningful multi-constituent collaborations. They write,

The entrenched norms of separation between the K-12 and postsecondary sectors; the separation of the educational sector from organizations directed at other, more holistic aspects of individual and community well-being; and the distinct cultures of these sectors may pose the biggest challenge of all to developing true P-20 collaborations [...] In effect, these conditions demand that educators shift their “mental models” (citing Senge, 1990), or cognitive structures for organizing thought and action, regarding the enterprise of broadening educational access through P-20 activity [...] An authentic P-20 approach involves a situation in which K-12 and higher education (and other stakeholders, if they are involved) build new knowledge and practice together in a bidirectional or dialogic manner, with neither sector being privileged (p. 332).

Top-down approaches to addressing community issues do not foster community participation in the decision making and formulations of overarching objectives, therefore avoiding group-generated ideas of informed growth. A multi-institutional collaboration increases exposure to multiple perspectives; however, if the initial partnership structure is vertical, it sets a precedent for future stunting of inter-institutional dialogue. Collaborations with one-directional communication flows are not real partnerships, and although outcomes may meet target goals, the potential for unintended benefits and positive outcomes from group work is lost.

Leadership has clear roles within each institution, but in collaborative work, where should that authority lie? Many collaborative project partners wish to maintain rigid identities. However, “What cannot be underestimated here is the need for a high level of leadership at the lead organization, including experience in working with community stakeholders and a reputation in the community for implementing effective projects....Leadership experience is especially critical in addressing the politics—including turf issues—between the various stakeholders in the partnership” (Collins, et. al., 2009, p. 401). The leadership of lead organizations should strive for that “third space” in their partnerships. They can do so through open communication, active support of partners, and input from the community they serve, stakeholders, and other institutions (Cordero-Guzmán, 2005). Partnerships that exhibit cohesion are more likely to prosper and “continuously adapt to the shifting sands of funding and policies” (Moran et al., 2009, p. 342).

Many state or foundation-funded collaborations possess a limited understanding of the community context for systemic change around postsecondary access and retention, not to mention limited engagement of community stakeholders in helping to design program and policies that would benefit underrepresented students. These partnerships are often not rooted in a local community or its context, or within an organization that has community-wide credibility and proven success—critical elements in the success of community-university-school partnership (Collins, et al., p. 398).

Educational collaborations should begin with a clear understanding of the goals and resources of the communities they serve. Many opportunities are missed by not supporting the pillars of the community, be they organizations, institutions, families, or individuals. “P-20 research has typically examined outcomes of P-20 collaborations rather than their organizational



structures. However, scholars have begun to define features of successful collaborative structures” (Moran et al, p. 343). Focusing on organizational structures allows us to better understand their behavior. If collaborations do not consider the histories of the people and communities to whom they intend to “deliver” services, those projects will likely not transcend the immediate objectives.

The Educational Partnership Center (EPC) in California is a state-funded organization that promotes P-20 partnerships throughout the university, college, and high school systems. The EPC is charged with sustaining a “shared vision, mission and goals; innovating with data-driven decision making; and complementary theories aligning goals from childhood through college to careers” (Moran et al. p. 342). The EPC views their work through sociocultural and self-efficacy theories. Learning is a set of “interactions between novices and experts as they work together on culturally relevant tasks, with novices gradually entering expert communities through growing levels of participation in family, school, and community settings” (p. 346). Respect and acknowledgement of one’s cultural background and family history serves as an invitation for the family to participate in the sharing of knowledge and the learning process. The EPC considers self-efficacy important in the individual learning process, highlighting the connection between increasing a student’s view of his or her own potential and their ability to successfully negotiate the educational system (p. 346-347). The EPC has found success in working with underrepresented youth through greater engagement with and consideration of the cultural and historical realities of the populations they serve. The example of the EPC is counter to the norm in educational collaborations because of their ability to reflect the community they work with into their organizational model.

Although there are myriad programs promoting college access, students of underrepresented communities often struggle to persist and succeed academically.

The irony is that despite hundreds of studies of student departure, institutions of higher education continue to face major difficulties in retaining underrepresented student populations (Kraemer, 1997; Nora & Cabrera, 1993, 1996; Rendon et al., 2000; Tierney, 2000). This reality has led us to seriously question the dominant theories of student retention in higher education, particularly as they pertain to students of color. The reality of failed retention efforts also has brought us to look for alternative methods and theories to enhance academic support systems for diverse student populations (Maldonado et al, 2005, p. 606).

The program model of the Tertulia Resolana High School~College~Community Collaborative offers an alternative method capable of inspiring and enhancing the academic achievement of students of color. The structure of the program pairs community college students with students from 4-year institutions who together facilitate weekly dialogues on Latina/o and Latin American Studies at a participating high school. Each high school student completes an independent research paper, and collectively, the class either works towards a capstone or a community-based project. At the same time, the college students meet collectively once per week for professional development, training, lesson plan workshops, and community resource expansion.

The multi-tiered mentorship aspect of the Tertulia Resolana model seeks to engender a cycle of mutually beneficial academic, civic, and social interactions between all actors involved.

The participants in the Tertulia Resolana program, high school students, college student-teachers, and the host high school teachers, all stand to benefit from the collaboration:

#### **Student-Teachers**

- Work experience and professionalization
- Network-building opportunities
- Teaching experience
- Leadership development
- Public speaking experience
- Expanded knowledge of current issues in public education
- Deeper subject content learning
- Greater self-awareness
- Investment in the community
- Co-mentorship

#### **High School Students**

- Release of inherent tension between teacher/student power dynamics
- Enhanced “college knowledge”
- Engagement and interaction with representatives of multiple institutions of post-secondary education
- Cultural validation
- Increased self-efficacy
- Participation in rigorous academic research and writing
- Near-peer mentorship through the connections established with the college student-teachers

#### **Host High School Teacher**

- Enhanced cultural awareness
- Engagement with college students who likely share similar cultural and historical characteristics with the high school students
- Opportunity to interact with both the college students and high school students in a dialogic manner that decenters power dynamics, allowing for a greater flow and engagement in the classroom

The Tertulia Resolana program model helps shape communities of learners by providing teacher-training opportunities to college students, who then gain skills and experience in sharing culturally relevant pedagogy. When a student holds himself or herself responsible for the

learning experience of others, their engagement is increased in the process of community building. Community-based collaborative programs can generate the space essential in bridging institutional gaps, such as the jump from high school to college, and from a 2-year institution to a 4-year institution. The immeasurable benefits resulting from a well-structured partnership are part of the essential defenses against deficit models of schooling.

The miseducation of Latina/o youth initiates an insidious cycle that results in the underrepresentation of this community in teaching and other knowledge-based professions. Because of the diminished population of Latina/o teachers, schools are unable to attract sufficient numbers of teachers who speak students' languages, are connected to their communities, and have the potential to increase the academic achievement of Latina/o youth. Consequently, the majority of Latina/o students continue to languish in classrooms where their histories are omitted from the curriculum, the sociocultural realities of their lives are largely ignored, and their futures are severely compromised, virtually ensuring the supply of Latina/o teachers will remain depleted. In order to develop a more diverse teaching force, schools need to be transformed into institutions that foster the intellectual and personal growth of youth of color (Irizarry and Donaldson, p. 186, 2012).

Approximately 60% of Hispanic students begin their college education at 2-year institutions, and only about 13% of Latino community college students move on to 4-year institutions and successfully attain their bachelor's degree (Fry, 2004; Gandara and Contreras, 2009; Zell, 2010). Research indicates a disconnection exists between Latino students' perceptions of the role of community colleges, and the actual, shifting functions of 2-year institutions. The majority of community colleges are not communicating clearly to their

matriculating students what exactly the roles of 2-year institutions are and failing to advise students on how best to achieve their educational and career goals (Martinez and Fernandez, 2004). The Tertulia Resolana model, through its tiers of mentorship and professional development, has the potential to function as a formal and informal channel of communication between students from different educational levels. The aim is to promote sharing of information on the increasingly complicated and ever-changing requirements for educational advancement.

The pairing of undergraduate students in the Tertulia Resolana becomes a powerful pedagogical tool because each brings a different understanding and experience into the classroom. Students attending community colleges are more likely to be local residents because they tend to live near their campus. Community college students have an advantage in developing a rapport with the high school students, bringing with them an understanding of the dynamics, history, and culture of the community. College students from 4-year institutions learn from their community college colleagues the “Funds of Knowledge” (Moll and Gonzalez, 2005) emanating from the homes and neighborhoods through both formal and informal interaction, research, and other means of development by way of professional and interpersonal dialogue. Meanwhile, 2-year students benefit from participating in the Tertulia Resolana through the integral role of teaching and serving as essential links between academia and the community. Community college students have the opportunity to share knowledge with their 4-year college student cohorts and the high school students and faculty.

Mentorship programs abound, but relatively little data has been collected on their effectiveness on “high-risk” Latina/o youth (Cordero-Guzmán, 2008; Torres Campos et al., 2009). Stanton-Salazar is often cited in his work on mentorship and Latino youth, particularly Mexican immigrants. His notion of “alienated embeddedness” (p. 251) reflects the reciprocal

“...lack of trust on the part of the student and a lack of cultural sensitivity by the institutional agent” (Valdez, 2008, pp. 843-844). Data indicates that Latino youth fare better when their mentors are also of Hispanic background (Torres Campos et al. 2008).

Do the theoretical frameworks used in retention research account for how students of color may simultaneously promote the practice of both dominant and transformative forms of cultural and social capital to achieve academic success? A second question is suggested by building community ties and commitments: In stark contrast to students having to leave their home cultures to achieve academic success, do the theoretical frameworks used by researchers account for how proactive and critical engagement within one’s own community, family, and ethnic/racial group may enhance retention? (Maldonado et al. p. 606)

Maldonado et al.’s study of Student Initiated Retention Projects (SIRP) offers a valuable and unique perspective in understanding existing models of college counseling and retention programs and their intersections with cultural sensitivity. Research indicates that many collaborative programs often neglect to acknowledge the cultural wealth inherent in the communities they intend to serve (Irizarry and Donaldson, 2012). Maldonado et al.’s work on the theoretical applications of student-led retention helps integrate a broad spectrum of commitments and approaches to education. Their assessment of SIRPs intervenes in the discussion and addresses education as a reflection of colonialism, and one’s status within that colonial project or process.

Present-day colonialism, or neo-colonialism, becomes translated into contemporary forms and is manifested through racial and ethnic oppression, social and economic inequality,

and cultural marginality in general. And so contemporary students of color continue to be confronted by the remnants of European colonialism through the ongoing dominance of whiteness (Roediger, 1994). For us, neo-colonialism is evident in theoretical views of retention that seem to advance the social integration of students of color. Consequently, what we are suggesting through our analysis of student-initiated retention efforts is not that Black, Latino, Asian, or American Indian student identities should be eroded as part of an effort to assimilate to a particular university's cultural norms; instead, the dominant culture against which so many students of color are forced to define themselves must be challenged and overturned by students of color acting upon their own convictions and emancipatory interests (Maldonado et al, p. 612).

The bulk of literature on education and collaborations does not engage, for the most part, in the discourses of colonialism, imperialism, and hegemony. Ira Shore's *Culture Wars* (1985), documents the backlash against the civil rights era and the cultural revolution within the U.S. His work provides an early glimpse into a critical time when American institutions were recalibrating their processes and benchmarks in order to maintain social stratification. The revolutionary element in SIRPs is the notion of youth working for youth where language no longer serves as a barrier, but a bridge, especially when spoken in the parlance of the community. A well structured community based student retention project has the ability to transcend the age-based segregation of youth from each other and (re)formulate flows of information regarding the disjunction between perception and reality in terms of expectations of their success or failure in academia.

Angela Valenzuela (1999), in her influential ethnographic study of a Texas high school, discusses the layers of missed opportunities for real and meaningful connections between and

among students, teachers, faculty, and the community. Most of the issues that stifle growth arise from a general lack of connection and investment in the community on the part of the school-based adults.

By examining misunderstandings of caring, a fundamental source of students' alienation and resistance becomes apparent. Schools [...] not only fail to validate their students' culture, they also subtract resources from them, first by impeding the development of authentic caring; and secondly, by obliging youth to participate in a non-neutral, power-draining type of authentic caring. To make schools truly caring institutions for members of historically oppressed subordinate groups [...] authentic caring, as currently described in the literature, is necessary but not sufficient. Students' cultural world and their structural position must also be fully apprehended, with school-based adults deliberately bringing issues of race, difference, and power into central focus. This approach necessitates abandoning the notion of a color-blind curriculum and a neutral assimilation process. The practice of individualizing collective problems must also be relinquished. A more profound and involved understanding of socioeconomic, linguistic, sociocultural, and structural barriers that obstruct the mobility of [...] youth needs to inform all caring relationships (p. 110).

Collaborative programs, even in their best manifestations, cannot resolve the ills of society, however, those with sound foundations and strong leadership can have a lasting and positive impact on the participants, institutions, and communities involved. The daily work of establishing and making normative the embrace of difference and diversity provides youth with opportunities to participate in the production of knowledge that use their stories and the stories of their ancestors as foundations upon which to build. Collaborations such as the Tertulia Resolana



seek to shift power dynamics by directing resources to where learning environments are hostile, be they in classrooms or neighborhoods. When students from historically marginalized communities teach, they learn, they empower, and they heal.

## Conclusion

This thesis began with my story as a new teacher being surrounded by police with their guns drawn simply for driving through a majority Latino and working-class neighborhood. The event continues to impact how I relate with students and the communities in which I teach and learn. It represents the institutional violence paradigm that is systematically, geographically, and statistically enforced. Critical race theory can serve as a tool for educators to address the challenges associated with narrowing and ultimately eliminating the achievement gap. To fight back, people of marginalized communities must write their stories, teach their histories, and empower their communities to humanize the people who have long been seen as the problem.

Building on the cultural wealth of communities, collaborative programs can leverage resources and create “third spaces” (Nuñez and Oliva, 2009) and platforms for historically excluded voices. Innovative and effective ways of contributing to stronger communities and developing life-long learners can be opened by shifting the fields of research, the sites of learning, and the roles of teacher/researcher. Sound collaborations require more than funding and dedicated staff. Trust and communication are essential in partnerships and demand “constant gardening” (Collins et al. p. 394) in order to maintain sustainability. Horizontal approaches to managing collaborations are often multi-directional, resulting in enhanced opportunities for community input and empowerment.

I developed and led the Tertulia Resolana High School ~ College ~ Community Collaborative program as an undergraduate student because I saw a need for culturally relevant and collaborative programs. The aim of the program is to break the hierarchical modes of pedagogy and place the center of learning within the community, building on its histories, strengths, and needs. The Tertulia Resolana strategy is pairing community college and 4-year college students as co-teachers in high school classrooms to facilitate dialogues on Latin American and Latina/o Studies. The benefits of bringing participants from different educational levels together are manifold. The multigenerational mentorship model neutralizes power dynamics inside the classroom. Institutional gaps are bridged and lines of communication are opened formally and informally through dialogue. A culturally relevant curriculum facilitated by community college and 4-year college students builds on the strengths within the classroom and community, beginning with the stories of the students themselves.

Tomas Atencio said that every culture has a *Resolana* – a space, or a way for sharing, being, and reflecting. *Sankofa*, the Swahili concept of looking back as an aide to understanding the present and the future, is an example. In order to challenge the reproduction of inequality in U.S. education system, there is a need to create spaces for critical and culturally sensitive reflection and dialogue. This is essential to better understand the past, contextualize the needs of the present, and develop the tools to shape a more just future.

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