

# **"Human Rights Violations & Diaspora: Reflections on a Team Taught Course"**

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**Prepared for Presentation at:**

Association of American Colleges and Universities

Panel: "Pedagogical Paralysis and Prickly Issues:

Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Human Rights"

January 21-24, 2009

Seattle, Washington

## **Introduction:**

- My name is Julie Shayne and our presentation is called "Human Rights Violations & Diaspora: Reflections on a Team Taught Course."
- I co-authored this with Patrick Blaine who cannot be here today.
- Patrick is a Doctoral Candidate in Comparative Literature at the University of Washington, Seattle and I am a Lecturer in Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences at University of Washington, Bothell.
- This presentation is based on a course we team-taught for the Center for University Studies and Programs at UW, Bothell this past fall.
- Our course is called "Imagining the Americas: Film, Literature, and Politics in Latin America." [I have a few syllabi if anyone is interested.]

- It is what is called a Discovery Core One course which is a team taught, interdisciplinary, ten credit freshmen seminar meant to engage students with a non-traditional subject and familiarize them with college.
- It is taught their first quarter in college – when we affectionately call them 13<sup>th</sup> graders.
- Patrick is a literary and film specialist, specifically Chilean, and I am a sociologist. My research is on gender, feminism, and revolution in Latin America and the diaspora.
- I have been teaching university students for over 10 years and have done several freshman seminars at both Emory University and UW Bothell.
- Patrick hasn't been teaching as long and this was his first freshman seminar.
- The class was focused on three countries and three themes: Mexico, Cuba, and Chile and Human Rights, Gender, and Diaspora.

- We organized the class by country, in revolutionary chronological order – Mexico, Cuba, then Chile.
- Each class session lasted 4 hours and half of that time was usually devoted to a film – viewing and discussing it.
- Our class was small – 20 students and by far the quietest group of students I have ever taught.
- Despite their shyness, we both felt like they were engaged and “getting it” but for whatever reasons they didn’t talk all that much.
- Today I am going to talk mostly about the human rights part of our course and if there is time say a little about the Diaspora component.
- I will share with you what we hoped to do, how we tried to do it, and the difficulties we encountered.

**Human rights:**

- **What we hoped to do:**

- We felt it was necessary and pertinent to emphasize not only state sponsored violence, but also economic violence, in order for our students to have a more complete grasp on the Human Rights problems in the region, both historically and currently.
- We also wanted to make sure the students were clear on US government, military, and corporate involvement in the injustices.
- Finally, an implicit goal was to get the students to think about this history in the context of the present, particularly Iraq and Afghanistan, and the ‘war on terror’ more generally.
  - We say implicit because we didn’t assign any texts which address this theme; rather, we brought it up in discussions where appropriate.
- **Difficulties:**
- There are three major challenges in teaching students about US sponsored human rights violations:

- **First:** How do we explain the egregious nature and magnitude of the human rights violations in the region without sounding like we are exaggerating?
  - [I have been teaching Latin American studies courses for 11 years and still struggle with this. Sometimes I feel like I am describing a Hollywood horror movie.]
- **Second:** How do we discuss the role of the US in the violations without alienating the students from us or the material, or causing them to conclude that we are just biased and the history we are sharing is merely opinion.
- **Third:** It's hard to teach a course like this without making students feel like Latin America and its people are one victimized continent that needs nothing more than a little pity.
- **So given our goals and challenges, what did we do?**
- From an organizational perspective, we decided to focus the entire class on three countries, as I said, Mexico, Cuba, and Chile, so they could get familiar with the specific histories; we

thought that sort of focus would make the information more concrete.

- We felt it was important to discuss the Latin American situation in an international context, so we briefly discussed the Holocaust, the Nuremberg trials, and the United Nations resolutions on Human Rights which followed.
- This discussion not only helped to contextualize Latin America but it also helped to provide an historical reality check that led credence to what we were teaching about the atrocious human rights violations in Latin America.
- Because of the tendency to dismiss this highly politicized topic as opinion, early on we called their attention to the sources the authors they read used to substantiate their points.
- We also gave them as much information about the authors as we had to establish their credibility.
- With respect to our final challenge, discouraging students from seeing Latin Americans solely as victims, we included a healthy

dose of information about social movements and resistance;  
namely Revolution.

- [Students have a better experience with the material and learn a more accurate history when they learn that Latinos and Latinas have always and continue to resist the injustices our students learned about.]
- They also had to write a research paper about any topic related to Latin American or Caribbean cultural production which meant they focused a good chunk of time learning about Latinos as artists and what not, rather than victims of war and poverty.
  - We think this was very important to helping them see Latinos as full subjects.
- Ultimately, and as cliché as it always sounds, we think the tactic that was most effective in helping us accomplish our goals and confront the challenges was to use an interdisciplinary collection of texts:
- They had 4 required books: 2 novels, a history text, and a book written by a journalist.

- We also had a course reader that had different types of writing – testimony, poetry, newspaper articles, social science etc.
- And, as I mentioned we showed films in every session; feature films, documentaries, and parody, including some Daily Show clips.
- All of the materials, regardless of the style, were really telling part of the same story.
- We think the fact that the students were hearing the same or similar messages in these different ways helped legitimize and clarify the material.
- It also implicitly meant we were confronting the issue of getting students to understand that the history we are sharing is indeed history and not Hollywood – the complementary texts were key in doing that.
  - For example, take the issue of the US presence in the region – perhaps the most contentious issue to teach students:

- The first film we showed them, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of class, was about a US priest who has spent the majority of his life protesting the School of the Americas - a US military training facility for the Latin American military; it was a combination of documentary and the Priest's first person narrative.
- For the same day, we assigned an article by an historian; it is a very detailed overview of late 20th century human rights violations in the region, including the role of the US in them. The article explains everything in the context of the Cold War and also mentioned the School of the Americas.
- Later on in the quarter, they read a novel about a Mexican community in New Mexico. One of the main characters was a very politicized Mexican-American man who said he always wanted to go to grad school and write a thesis about the School of the Americas. So throughout the novel he was sharing his commentary on it which was basically the same as what they read in the history text and saw in the film from the Priest.

- Perhaps this approach is akin to what sociologists call triangulation – using 3 different methods to collect data about a given research question.
- We wish we could say it was as calculated as that but we are realizing this more concretely as we reflect on the class.
- We also think the films were absolutely key.
- As I said these classes are 4 hours so we had plenty of time to show at least one every class.
  - [This quarter I am teaching two different Latin American studies classes and it is noticeably more challenging to do so without regularly showing films.]

## **Diaspora**

- I now want to speak very briefly to the subject Diaspora.
- **What we hoped to do:**
- Our main goal here was to put a major dent in the students' preconceived, racist perceptions of any and all Latinos.

- We wanted to give the students a socio historical context to understand why there are so many Latinos in the States in the first place.
- **How we tried to do it:**
- Our approach and challenges were similar as to the Human Rights related content and of course there was overlap in the material.
- Understanding the human rights violations in Latin America in part helps explain why there is a Latin American Diaspora in the first place!
- I expected the students to be hostile to the material based on my experiences last year teaching freshman about Latino immigrants in the States.
  - [Last year, one student basically argued that they are all criminals, and they all should be sent back. The reasons for them being in the States or the mistreatment they received once here were totally irrelevant to her.]

- So, with that in mind, and being mindful of anti-immigrant sentiment, we attempted to humanize the situation through films and a novel.
- We showed a film for each diasporic community; each was heart wrenching as it captured separation and each showed that even in the worst of situations people do not want to leave their countries; rather it is a very last resort.
- In the discussion of one film Patrick asked the students how long is the longest time they'd ever been away from their parents – just thinking about that question made them think about the topic from a more empathetic perspective; especially because 2 weeks felt like a long time and they were hearing stories of families being separated for ten years if not more.
- The students liked the films very much, were noticeably moved by them, and seemed very willing to discuss them.
  - This is particularly noteworthy given their collective quietness.

- We had the director/producer/writer of the Chilean one there and she told the students personal stories of leaving Chile as a young girl which of course made it as tangible as can be; they were quite affected.
- We also assigned the novel *The Guardians* that I mentioned before and it captured the amazingly difficult lives of Mexicans on both sides of the border.
- Additionally, we used humor, particularly the film “A Day Without a Mexican.” It’s not the greatest film but it was an effective way to capture some of what we were getting at.
- **Difficulties:**
- Interestingly, we expected this to be the most difficult section to teach because racism against Latinos is so deep rooted but we both think it was the most straightforward and successful.

**Conclusions/general observations:**

- In conclusion, we had a great time teaching the class and look forward to doing it again.

- We were pleased with the outcome.
  - [I have five of the same students in my current class so apparently at least they were as well!]
- We think team teaching helped us a lot because the one of us who was not leading the discussion was listening as a student and could interject points of clarification from their perspective.
- Our different disciplines also enhanced the course, in everything from how to lead a discussion to what materials we ended up assigning.
- It has been very helpful to think about the course from this vantage point and we hope to come up with new tactics for teaching these prickly issues in the future.