

CDIPS Final Project

2021-22 Cohort

Irina Meier, University of New Mexico

“Rethinking Project-based Learning and Assessment Through the Lens of Equity, Diversity, Compassion, and Self-Awareness: Writing An Immigrant’s Story”

Executive Summary

While considering the diversity and equity gaps in the current curriculum, I saw the necessity not only to diversify the content of what we teach and provide voices to those objects of study that tend to be silenced within the framework of the canonical curriculum, but also to reconsider the entrenched narratives of learning that our students encounter and to diversify their ways of knowing as well as our methods of assessing the developed competencies. Recently, I piloted a new fully online course on immigration. Even though it was a general course on immigration to the United States, the assignment framework that I introduced in this course can be modified and applied in a Russian culture or advanced language classroom. Within this framework, students start with an intentionally solipsistic and culturally affirming self-assessment of their own origins through the template of the “I am From” poem. Then, with the instructor’s guidance, from the individualized perception, as they prepare for the interview with an immigrant, students move through Milton Bennett’s stages of intercultural sensitivity including denial, defense, and minimization. The interview part of the class project becomes the stage of acceptance. In this step, students demonstrate compassion, appreciation for pluriversality, and gratitude for connectedness. In the third step of the project, students complete a self-reflection report of their interview experience that allows them to comprehend and organize their emphatic response and explore their own deep-seated assumptions in the light of this new empirical experience. In the final step, students are offered multiple formats for creating a story of the immigrant they interviewed (a traditional essay, a “suitcase” digital exhibit, a short documentary, a graphic novel, a piece of visual art or music among others). While writing the immigrant’s story and serving as the voice for the person they interviewed, students go through the final stage of intercultural sensitivity – adaptation as they approach another person’s individual experiences with integrity and respect, and integrate these individual experiences into the cultural narrative of the country, while remaining aware of their own cultural biases and privilege.

References:

Asao Inoue’s Blog & Resource Database: <http://asaobinoue.blogspot.com/>

Blum, Susan D. “Ungrading for Learning & Equity.” *Equitable Online Teaching: Free Workshop Series*. <https://onlinenetworkofeducators.org/sp22-equity-series/archive-susan-blum/>

Culturally-responsive pedagogy self-assessment <https://dueeast.org/wp-content/uploads/Culturally-Responsive-Pedagogy-CRP-Self-assessment.pdf>

Gorski, P. (2018). *Reaching and teaching students in poverty*. Teachers College Press.

Feldman, J. *Grading for equity: What it is, why it matters, and how it can transform schools and classrooms*. Corwin, 2019

Randon, Laura. *Sentipensante (sensing/thinking) pedagogy: educating for wholeness, social justice and liberation*. Sterling, Va. : Stylus Pub., 2009

Rifkin, Benjamin (2019) "Teaching Compassion in the Russian Language and Literature Curriculum: An Essential Learning Outcome," *Russian Language Journal*: Vol. 69: Iss. 1, Article 4.

Stommel, Jesse. "How to Ungrade". <https://www.jessestommel.com/how-to-ungrade/>

Analysis

Based on the previous experience of teaching culture courses, including courses on immigration, I intended to create a series of assignments in an upper-division Humanities course that would measure typically overlooked competencies (such as empathy and conscientiousness, appreciation for pluriversality and integrity to serve as a voice for others, presence and self-knowledge) and develop assessment methods that would measure these competencies fairly and in a holistic manner.

The University of New Mexico is a large public, minority-serving institution. Many of the undergraduate students at the University of New Mexico are first-generation students. Many have full-time or part-time jobs while going through school. Many fight through economic hardship. The student body includes a significant number of Hispanic and Native American students. Most are familiar with immigration through their close and extended family but their knowledge about immigration is usually limited to immigration from Mexico to the United States. This project intended to introduce students to the categories of immigrants with which they are less familiar.

The limitations of the course for which the project was created are the following: 1) an online format that provides access to the material for a greater number of students but excludes direct face-to-face interaction between students and the instructor and among students; 2) the length of the course is 4 weeks, which is sufficient for completing the project but might be insufficient for developing long-lasting changes in the patterns of critical thinking about immigration issues and perception of immigrants. Another limitation in developing the new practices of assessment involves strict requirements regarding all online courses, including the requirement to have clear-cut rubrics and assign letter grades. These assignments, however, can be reworked and implemented in a face-to-face, traditional course to avoid some of the above mentioned limitations.

The goals for students in completion of this project were:

- To articulate the complexity and diversity of immigration experience
- To model personal sensitivity to major linguistic and cultural aspects of human experience
- To examine the attitudes toward immigrants in the community
- To analyze the key connections between the worldview/value systems of immigrants from different ethnic groups and their process of adaptation to the American culture
- To recognize the impact that immigrants had and continue to have in shaping the United States

- To employ various communicative strategies to engage in a meaningful and positive dialogue with immigrants from local communities, demonstrate integrity to serve as their voices, and narrate their stories in a comprehensive and compassionate manner

Design

The introductory assignment invited students to reflect on their own stories of origin and identity. After reading the original poem “Where I am From” by George Ella Lyon, students were assigned to use the provided template, appropriate images, and Kaltura Capture recording tool to record their story of origin and identity and comment on three of their peers’ stories. Using the template below, students were expected to explore their own identity through objects, sounds, tastes, family traditions, and family stories. This assignment was designed to introduce learners to their peers and instructor, to help them recognize the value of cultural heritage in their life, and to help them see the topics of the course in the light of their own story of origin and identity.

“I Am From” Poem Template

Adapted by: Levi Romero

Inspired by “Where I’m From” by George Ella Lyon

I am from _____ (an everyday item in your home)
 from _____ and _____ (products or everyday
 objects in your home)
 I am from the _____ (description of
 your home) _____ (detail about
 your home – a smell, taste or feel)
 I am from the _____ (plant, flower, or natural item)
 The _____ (plant or tree near your home)
 whose long limbs I remembered as if they were my own.

I’m from _____ and _____ (a
 family tradition or family trait)
 from _____ and _____ (family members).
 I’m from _____ and _____ (family
 habits) and from _____ (family habit).

I’m from _____ and _____
 (things you were told as a child)
 and _____ (a song or
 saying you learned as a child).
 I’m from _____ (a family tradition).
 I’m from _____ (place of birth) and _____ (family
 ancestry, nationality or place),
 from _____ and _____ (family foods),
 From _____ (a story
 about a family member) _____
 _____ (detail about the story or
 person),

of _____ (description of family mementos, pictures, or treasures) _____ (location of mementos – under my bed, on the wall, in my heart, etc) _____

____ (more description if needed).

In addition to the poem, students were expected to make 2-3 statements about their identity and inaccurate assumptions that people might make about them, using the following formula: "I am/do but I am not/do not..." (ex. *I am from New Mexico but I don't like green chili. I grew up in a Hispanic household but I don't speak Spanish.*) This part of the assignment was designed with the purpose of validating individual human experiences and exposing cultural assumptions that each of us has. Even though we exist in already established social, ethnic, racial, etc. circles, each of us has a unique perspective and unique history. This assignment gave students an opportunity to validate their own identity, no matter which path of life or social standing they came from, and laid the groundwork for interviewing an immigrant with empathy and self-awareness.

Throughout the next several weeks, as students proceeded through the course modules that introduced them to a variety of topics regarding immigration, such as adaptation, identity shift, belonging, cultural othering, nostalgia among many others, students compiled a number of potential questions to an immigrant that could stimulate a positive and productive dialogue. After conducting the interview, students were expected to complete a self-reflection of their experiences, using the following questions as their guidelines:

1. How would evaluate your interview overall in terms of its meaningfulness, effectiveness, and positive nature?
2. How would you evaluate your listening skills and attentiveness to detail during this interview?
3. According to your observations, how did your interviewee feel during the interview? Calm, nervous, excited, uncomfortable? If you noticed any discomfort, what strategies did you use to alleviate it?
4. According to your observations, which questions or topics caused a surge of emotion (positive or negative) in the interviewee? How did you navigate through these questions/topics?
5. What point, experience, or story resonated with you the most? Did you share this connection with the interviewee? If not, why did you decide against sharing it?
6. What did you succeed at during this interview?
7. What would you do differently if you had to complete a similar project in future?
8. What have you learned about YOURSELF while conducting this interview?

Students were encouraged to be truthful about their successes and failures and were informed that their reflections would be evaluated based on completion, thoroughness, and the level of self-awareness in approaching the questions.

The final step of the project was to write the immigrant story in the format of students' choice. The following formats were suggested as options:

- a 5-7 page third-person narrative
- a "suitcase" digital exhibit (if you found an immigrant who has an interesting arrival story, I encourage you to choose this format; for your exhibit, you will collect a number of meaningful items - artifacts - from the immigrant that they brought with them to the US, stage those items in a suitcase (it doesn't have to be the original suitcase that your

interviewee used), and record a Kaltura digital narrative, describing the story behind and significance of each item)

- a short film: animation, documentary, etc. (8-10 minutes minimum but no longer than 25 min; your film should not be just a recording of the interview, each selected footage should be accompanied by your analysis/narration/explanation)
- a story or a chapter of a graphic novel (together with your creative writing part (5 pages minimum but no longer than 10 pages), submit one page explaining your intentions, concepts, connections, etc.)
- a dramatic original monologue performance (5 minutes minimum but no longer than 10 minutes; together with the video file, upload one page explaining your intentions, concepts, connections, etc.)
- a series of meaningful, original photographs (5 photographs minimum, but no more than 10; provide a paragraph for EACH photo explaining the concept behind it)
- an original work of art (can be submitted as a series of pictures or a video demonstrating your work; submit one page explaining your intentions, concepts, connections, etc.).

Alignment

Objective	Assessments	Strategies/Activities/Methods
Students will explore, describe, and validate their own story of origin and identity.	"I Am From" poem	Customizing the poem, using the template Recording a digital narrative with appropriate images Making "I am/I do.... but I am not/I do not" statements
Students will develop appreciation and model personal sensitivity to major linguistic and cultural aspects of human experience shared by their peers	Comments to peers' "I Am From" Stories	Written comments
Students will prepare a list of potential questions for their interview that will promote the positive and compassionate dialogue	Immigrant Story – STEP 1: A list of questions	Written list of 15-20 questions based on the issues discussed in the course
Students will employ communicative strategies to engage in a meaningful and positive dialogue with	Immigrant Story – STEP 2: Interview	Methods of keeping notes during the interview depend on the interviewee's level of comfort

immigrants from local communities		
Student will reflect on their experience throughout the interview with an immigrant	Immigrant Story – STEP 3: Self-reflection	Written self-reflection following the guidelines
Students will demonstrate integrity to serve as voices for local immigrants and narrate their stories in a comprehensive and compassionate manner	Immigrant Story – STEP 4: Final project submission	Final project in a format of students' choice

Examples of rubrics for grading:

A. Interview questions.

15 to >12.0 pts

Excellent

A list of 15-20 question was submitted. The questions are relevant to the course topics and conducive to a positive and meaningful conversation.

12 to >10.5 pts

Good

Between 10 and 15 questions are submitted. Some questions might be irrelevant to the course topics. Some questions might not be conducive to a positive and meaningful conversation.

10.5 to >0 pts

Fair/poor

Less than 10 questions are submitted. The questions are irrelevant to the course topics and/or inappropriate.

B. Self-reflection.

10 to >8.9 pts

Excellent

The reflection provides thoughtful answers to the prompt questions that demonstrate a high degree of self-awareness.

8.9 to >7.9 pts

Good

The reflection provides thoughtful answers to the majority of prompt questions that demonstrate a comparatively high degree of self-awareness.

7.9 to >0 pts

Fair/poor

The reflection does not provide answers to more than 3 prompt questions and/or fails to demonstrate self-awareness.

Development

While proceeding through the steps in completing the project, students required the instructor's special guidance in the following areas:

1. To find an immigrant (a class discussion board was created for students to help their peers find a person to interview)

2. A list of questions (students were instructed to avoid questions about legal status of immigrants and show empathy and tact in approaching potentially sensitive topics such as discrimination, violence, loss of family members, etc.)

3. Interview:

- students were instructed to use their questions as a blueprint but focus on making a pleasant, productive, and positive conversation where one topic flows from another

- students were encouraged not to impose their opinions, interpretations, and beliefs during the conversation

- students were instructed to listen carefully to the story that is being told to them and pay attention to the words chosen, to the intonations used, to the emotions expressed, so that they can write a more powerful immigrant story for their final project

- students were encouraged to demonstrate transparency with their interviewees in choose a method of keeping notes during the interview that their interviewee was comfortable with

- students were encouraged to remind their interviewees of the confidentiality

- If students intended to use a camera or a voice recorder, they had to be upfront with their interviewee whether they will use their actual voice and video footage for the final project or whether they record the interviewee just for their personal note taking.

Implementation

One of my most important goals for this class project was to dispel entrenched narratives of learning and assessment that work against equitable, conscientious, and compassionate education. Instead of focusing on purely intellectual pursuit, I emphasized the empirical process, the sense of human connectedness, different ways of knowing, and culturally validating practices. I avoid playing the role of a sole expert in the classroom whose purpose is to deliver the knowledge. Instead, I encouraged students to discover the meaning, value, and truth of being in their own origin and to find balance between intellectual, social and emotional learning as they complete the assignments in this course. I strove to fairly assess traditionally less valued skills of empathy, appreciation for pluriversality, and gratitude for connectedness.

Evaluation

I received very positive feedback from the students. Some developed new friendships with interviewees that they would have never met if not for this class project, some got inspired for creating more projects about immigration and origins, others noted having a cathartic, empowering, and healing experience during interviews and through writing. The learning benefits of this course could be increased by allowing students to share their final projects with each other. However, the sensitive nature of the topics discussed and the human subjects involved require a considerable degree of confidentiality that allows interviewees to be honest about their experiences.