

Thresholds and Borderlands: Using Chicana Feminist Theory to Navigate Changing Identities

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Abstract

Instruction librarians embedded in the first-year experience of first-generation college students are uniquely positioned to shepherd novice researchers across a threshold that demarcates their past experience as consumers of knowledge to their new role as creators of knowledge. Beginning from my own *testimonio* – a discursive practice reliant on the narration of personal experience – my research applies a critical ethnic studies lens to explore the in-between space occupied by first-generation Latinx students as they navigate the threshold of an academic identity that can feel hostile and alien to those underrepresented in higher education. By applying theories that have come out of Ethnic Studies rather than Library and Information Science (LIS), I propose a new way for academic librarians to see and support the often-painful experience of transformation from student/outsider to scholar/insider.

Theorizing the Student Scholar

For students who are the first in their family to cross into the liminal space between the primary culture of their home community and the university, where language, etiquette, practice, affect, and relationships are often entirely alien, attention and care is called for to retain and expand the ranks of Latinx and other minoritized and first-generation students. Having maintained strong identities and connections that of necessity survive incremental assimilation during a student's lifetime, approaching a threshold that requires a shapeshifting and the interrogation of perceived beliefs becomes a painful and transformative passage. Theories of identity that keep us connected to a larger sense of self can help us – from undergrads to professors – theorize our experiences in institutions that were not made for us.

Herencia

Encountering Chicana feminist theory as an undergraduate in American Studies, I was given a language, a lens, a life-preserver, a way to theorize my experience as an outsider in a place of in-between. As Chicana Feminist Epistemology (CFE) privileges the life experiences and knowledge of women of color, specifically Mexican-American women, it exposes relationships not visible to the Eurocentric knowledge systems reified in U.S. higher education, and lays bare conflicts of power (Delgado Bernal, 1998). The framework of CFE “draws from the existing work of Chicana feminists, questions the notion of objectivity and a universal foundation of knowledge” (555). My own family and community history had not prepared me to speak, write, and think like a scholar. Theory was an inheritance (*una herencia*) that my parents could not give me. What a gift, then, to find this discourse that spoke directly to my hybrid and authentic self. Now that I occupy the privileged place of authority that so terrified the undergraduate version of myself, how may I transmit this gift to young Chicanas and other students learning how to exist in this space that was not made for us?

Cultural Intuition

“Through the experiences of ancestors and elders, Chicanas and Chicanos carry knowledge of conquest, loss of land, school and social segregation, labor market stratification, assimilation, and resistance” (Delgado Bernal 1998, 564). Delgado Bernal proposes that Chicana scholars have unique perspectives made up of what she calls “cultural intuition,” which comes from four sources: personal experience, existing literature, professional experience, and the analytical research process itself. She argues that cultural intuition for Chicana scholars is unique because personal experience also includes collective experience, community memory, and ancestral knowledge, all of which have been deployed in our communities as survival strategies.

Testimonio

As a methodology that arose out of human rights struggles in Latin America (Calderón, et al., 525), giving one's *testimonio* is an act of courage. Research can be so personal -- what questions, frameworks, practices might emerge from a courageous revelation of the lineage and legacy created by my own experience of higher education? The deep, reflective practice of writing my *testimonio* unearths ambivalence, doubt, grief, and anger at the inequities of the U.S. education system that made me and to which I have committed myself professionally. How might these questions, frameworks, and practices serve my students and at the same time serve me in this place of in-between-ness, ambivalence, and frequent fear of imposture? Explicitly sharing my own experiences of both being a college student and then eventually a faculty member helps me to break down a barrier that publicly exposes the bricks of where I come from and how I got here.

Nepantla

Gloria Anzaldúa, the Chicana feminist upon whose seminal work much of CFE was built, theorized a state of liminality she named *nepantla*: “the overlapping space between different perceptions and belief systems” (2002, 541). In our work as academic librarians, where we exist as both insiders to the institutional university, enforcing its standards and values, and outside of the disciplinary rigor in which other faculty are immersed, we are positioned to guide students through this “in-between place of possibility” (Calderón et al., 518). We are able to disturb the binary of teacher-student by demonstrating a level of care and non-judgement that supports their development into scholars and critical thinkers. Within this framework there is enormous potential to demonstrate the value of what academic librarians actually do.

Application: Validation Theory

My work with the learning communities of Latinx students that I teach through an HSI (Hispanic Serving Institution) initiative brought me back to the place where I left off as a student. Theorizing my experience as an undergraduate followed a long line that reached back to the place I came from, to my mother and her aspirations, to my grandparents and the limits of their education and the bounds of their desires for life outside of their community. It reaches back in time and across borders -- what does it mean to live in the borderlands? Who must we become to speak the language of this place that was once our place?

In her 1994 study, Mexican-American education scholar Laura Rendón acknowledges that generations of college students have had to change and assimilate, to blend in, cut ties, and erase parts of who they are, in order to succeed in the academy. Rendón's theory of validation, while not explicitly a CFE, involves affirming the value of student voice and experience, actively reaching out to students to offer guidance rather than waiting for students to seek it, creating opportunities for students to validate each other through practices like peer review and working in teams, and crucially, creating a familia atmosphere built on trust and familiarity. Her research on students' experience with validating agents revealed that what occurred outside of class was just as important as what happens in the classroom.

In addition to being classroom teachers, instruction and reference librarians are uniquely positioned to cover both fronts. For example, students often come to us because they've been invalidated or neglected by a teacher. In a forthcoming chapter entitled "Validation Theory and Culturally Relevant Curriculum in the Information Literacy Classroom,"* Antonia Olivas and I describe the culturally responsive curriculum we created for our two-week information literacy module, in which we apply the principles of validation theory. In it we discuss the concrete ways we center the experiences of Latinx students and scholars to introduce students to academic culture and research.

Why Librarians?

In the valuable time that CSUSM librarians spend in the classroom, we have the opportunity to be thoughtful and intentional in the way we cultivate student scholars. One of the major roles of the academic librarian is helping students to become aware of multiple directions of inquiry by introducing them to disciplinary knowledge and research as ways of thinking about the world and its problems. These represent possibilities for ways of engaging with the world and making an impact in it that they may have never thought of. Crafting this curriculum using the principles of validation theory and CFE is one important way we demonstrate the application of theory to understand the affective development of our students as they learn to engage with higher levels of scholarly values.

We need theories that help us see ourselves and our students fully, as whole people, so that we may create meaningful, powerful practices that bring people from all excluded communities into the academy and change the shape, face, and soul of higher education.

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