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COMMENTARY

Telling Migration Stories:
Course Connections and Building Classroom Community

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Abstract

This commentary shares an assignment on family migration stories from an upper-division undergraduate course on global migration. The assignment, which asks students to interview each other about their family migration histories and then analyze their partner's story, requires students to apply course readings to the real-world context of their peers' experiences. The commentary provides an overview of the assignment and challenges students encountered. I also highlight the lessons learned, both in terms of course content and classroom community. The large public teaching university where I work is a Hispanic-serving institution and is home to around 1,000 undocumented students. Many more students are immigrants or the children of immigrants. Bringing in students' personal experiences with migration serves to build academic confidence and classroom community among these mostly first-generation students while building connections among students and setting the tone for the course as a whole. It positions students as experts and valuable members of our classroom learning community, while recognizing the importance of their experiences with issues of culture and identity, xenophobia, transnational family-life, immigration enforcement, and immigration status. The assignment also disrupts narrow assimilationist narratives of migration by highlighting the diversity of students' migration histories.

Keywords: family migration; storytelling; class community; first-generation students

The first day of my first semester teaching at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), I walked into my *Migration and Modernity* class and watched as three of the twenty-five students identified themselves as "undocumented and unafraid." Since that first semester, I have tried to foreground students' experiential expertise as it relates to the class material. For first-generation college students in particular, feelings of "self-doubt, isolation, exposure to negative racial and ethnic stereotypes or discrimination" can negatively impact their social integration and academic confidence, key elements in

student success and retention (Núñez 2009, 180; Lotkowski, Robbins, and Noeth 2004).[1] Building connections to students' lives thus not only engages students with course content, but also positions them as experts within the undergraduate classroom.

In this commentary, I share a course assignment on family migration stories that facilitates students' understanding of the course material by asking them to apply course concepts in a new situation and builds academic confidence and classroom community through storytelling. In Fall 2019, twenty-eight out of twenty-nine students completed a short evaluation of the assignment detailing something they learned, their favorite part, the most difficult part, what they could have done differently, and how I could improve the assignment.

Anthropologist Sarah Willen argues that anthropology has an important role to play in immigration issues because of "its capacity to link […] multi-level analyses of how illegality is produced" to "sensitive portraits of how it is experienced" (Willen 2007, 12). In the context of the increasing criminalization and illegalization of migrants in host countries around the world, such nuanced accounts can sensitize the campus community, the public, and decision-makers who shape immigration policies.

Course Setting

Migration & Modernity is an upper-division, writing intensive, general education capstone as well as a core course within the International Studies major. The structure of the course first introduces frameworks for thinking about migration. In doing so, it debunks the "Ellis Island" or assimilation model of migration that we often take for granted. The second part of the course builds off these frameworks, diving into ethnographic material that provides insight into the lived experiences of migrants around the world.

Students from across the campus take the course. Each semester, I never know what migration experiences and histories students will bring with them. Immigration touches almost everyone on our campus in some way. For many, immigration—whether through issues of culture and identity or anxieties about status and enforcement—is part of their daily lives. CSULB is home to around 1,000 undocumented students. Beyond this, it is estimated that 12 percent of California K-12 students live with an undocumented family member (Passel and Cohn 2018), and the Long Beach-Anaheim-Los Angeles metropolitan area has the largest concentration of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipients in the country (Lopez and Krogstad 2017). CSULB is also a Hispanic-serving institution, and 43 percent of students identify as Hispanic/Latino ("Fast Facts"

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[1] Self-doubt, isolation, exposure to negative racial and ethnic stereotypes or discrimination, and lack of mentoring present particular difficulties for Latina/o students and are associated with decreased confidence in their academic ability (Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler 1996; Hurtado and Carter 1997; Smedley, Myers, and Harrell 1993).

2019). Close to half of incoming students are Pell grant-eligible, and many of our students are first-generation students.

Assignment & Purpose

Students work in pairs to interview each other about their family migration stories. They then analyze their partner's story using course readings. Students are graded individually on the project. We begin the assignment at the beginning of the third week of the semester, and they have several more weeks to complete the analysis.

After explaining the assignment and breaking students into pairs, I give each pair time in class to review interview questions. I have provided students with the questions from the *Reimagining Migration: Moving Stories* project as a model.[2] The UCLA *Reimaging Migration Project's Moving Stories* platform invites students and others to share their stories of migration through interviews. We did not use their app, however, I do like the structure of their question bank because no matter how many generations removed from migration a student might be, there are a set of questions about their own story, their parents' stories, or their ancestors' stories. I ask students to identify four to five questions they would like to answer about their family's story and discuss with their partners.

I provide another class session for students to complete the interviews. Most record directly on their phones and, to minimize background noise, choose a quiet place on campus to interview each other. However, students who cannot or do not want to use their phones can use my digital recorder and lapel microphone, or they may submit a written response instead. Last semester, one pair chose to write their responses because of scheduling complications and another because the student was uncomfortable with using smartphones. In other cases, students have chosen to write instead of record because of the emotional content of their interviews. Once the pairs complete their interviews, they upload them to a discussion thread on the online learning management system, where other students can listen to them.

Students then have several weeks to write a 500-750 word short paper that analyzes their partner's story using two course readings. This means that though we conduct the interviews early in the semester, they usually have about six weeks' worth of readings to draw on for their papers. They post these analyses to the discussion thread underneath their partner's story. We then debrief in class, discussing common themes and ideas or stories that really stood out to us.

The assignment rubric assesses how well students demonstrate understanding of basic course concepts, effectively use course readings in a new context, and

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[2] The Moving Stories Interview questions, app, and educators' guide are available here: https://reimaginingmigration.org/moving-stories-home/. While aimed more towards 9-12 grade students, it would be easily adaptable to the college classroom.

organization, structure, and writing. Since this is not a research methods class, I do not grade students' interview skills or even their stories. All students receive full points for the interview itself if they complete and upload it.

Disrupting the Assimilationist Paradigm

Every group of students brings something new to the assignment, but consistently, the stories effectively disrupt linear assimilationist paradigms. This past semester, for example, my students' stories included multiple migrations and pathways. Some of the essays noted that students had always associated migration with economic push/pull factors, and were surprised by stories around family motivations and persecution or discrimination. Several African American students in the class initiated important conversations about how the assimilationist paradigm "refuses to treat Africans as part of the history of migration to North America," as one of our class readings argued (Spickard 2009, 9). That is, what we generally think of as assimilation is really "Anglo-conformity" and not a multi-cultural melting pot that recognizes the diversity of the origins of where "Americans" come from (Spickard 2009, 12). Indeed, one student's story emphasized the lack of knowledge available about his family's origins prior to their enslavement. He contrasted this with their choice to move out of the South and across the country during the Great Migration in the early twentieth century.

Listening and Connecting

Perhaps most importantly, the assignment helps build a sense of community within the classroom. Most of the students in the 29-person class had never met before the course. All of the student evaluations said listening to and learning about their partner's story was their favorite part of the assignment. Over the course of the rest of the semester, I noticed students gravitated towards working with their partners again in other in-class assignments.

Listening to each other's stories also created a foundation of respect and community for the course as a whole. Often, this sense of community emerges over the course of the semester as students share pieces of their experiences. However, sometimes classroom dynamics are such that students never share. This assignment helps to make the sharing of migration experiences one of the main ways we make sense of course material.

Key to this process is the trust that students must have in each other and the class to share their stories. As one student said, "It's scary to open up to strangers…at first. Once there's common ground and you both are comfortable and actively invested, it's nice." Given fears of opening up, which are well-founded for undocumented students, it is important to establish guidelines for sharing within the assignment. While in other classes I have had students develop these guidelines themselves, for this assignment, I provided them with a set of guidelines around respect and confidentiality, drawn from the syllabus.

We discussed as a large group the risks and benefits of sharing our personal stories. I reminded students that their interviewees always had the choice to "opt out" at any time during the interview, even though they had chosen the questions themselves. Students also had the option to not share their story with the rest of the class and instead share it only with their partner and me. Finally, we discussed the mental health related resources on campus should their stories bring up issues they wanted to address. In their evaluations, students pointed out that it was important that they were the ones to decide how much to share and what aspects of their stories to reveal to the rest of the class. Despite the current political context and the risks, many students reveal themselves to be members of mixed-status families or undocumented themselves.

Conclusion

This, like most assignments, is a work in progress and can be adapted to the needs of each particular cohort. This semester, for example, we are building a class question bank rather than using a preset list of questions. Students also expressed the desire to hear more classmates' stories. We will dedicate a class session to workshopping the stories themselves to give them the opportunity to hear each other and brainstorm how to connect to class readings, one of the major challenges students have.

This assignment provides me with insight into my students' backgrounds early in the semester, allowing me to draw on them throughout the course. For example, I often approach students before particular class sessions to ask if they would feel comfortable talking more about their experiences with visas, family separation, or DACA. By the end of the semester, students themselves volunteer these contributions, without additional prodding from me.

Sharing stories builds a sense of community, empathy towards peers, and helps students see course materials as relevant to their own lives. Although I first went into this assignment focusing on the last outcome, it is the first two that make this assignment so powerful for students. Engaging in this way early in the semester sets the tone that students' voices, perspectives, and experiences are valuable in the classroom. It helps to break that awkward beginning of semester ice and to create a sense that we—students and professor—are working together to understand global migration.

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