

Curtis Acosta

Developing Critical Consciousness: Resistance Literature in a Chicano Literature Class

Starting from a framework that emphasizes indigenous heritage, high school teacher Curtis Acosta and students in the Chicano/Raza Studies classes engage with literature that reflects the students' lives, families, and histories. Doing so encourages students to visualize and affirm academic identities while they confront current issues of oppression, develop critical consciousness, and become familiar with movements of resistance and action.

We must become the change we want to see in the world.

—*Mohandas Gandhi*

For years, we have heard that politics should stay out of the classroom and that the educational space needs to be one without a bias. However, an analysis of the policies that have affected the public education system of our country exposes a multitude of inequities and biases that impinge on the lives, hopes, and dreams of students. Engagement in political discourse is an integral part of life in the Chicano literature and Raza Studies classrooms at Tucson High Magnet School. Our Mexican American/Raza Studies Department uses *Chicano* to refer to the Mexican American experience within the United States and *raza*, a more inclusive term that represents the entire human race.

Context: Tucson High Magnet School

Tucson High Magnet School (THMS) celebrated its one-hundredth anniversary in 2006–07. It is older than the state of Arizona itself. Change does not come quickly to a school with generations of tradition. Thus, the creation of a Chicano/Raza Studies block of literature and history was met with resistance. Ironically, the school is immersed in neighborhoods rich in Chicano traditions and is across the street from the University of Arizona, a university with less than 15 percent Latino/a or Chicano/a students. THMS has a majority of 60 percent Chicano/a

or Latino/a students, with 8 percent of our school population being English language learners.

Tucson High became a magnet school to increase the ethnic diversity of the student body. Since the school has a larger European American student population than the surrounding community, our free and reduced-price lunch numbers do not accurately reflect the neighborhood of Tucson High. Our European American student population is at 28 percent, while 39 percent of the students qualify for free and reduced-price lunches.

I have taught at Tucson High for eleven years and am one of a few Chicano teachers on our campus. Since my university days, it has been my passion to help Chicanos/as and other minority students get to college. In nearly every class at my small liberal arts college, I was the only minority student, and as the years went on and my consciousness grew, I was disgusted by the injustice of my experiences and filled with a burning desire for change. It was that spirit that brought me to Tucson High.

Purpose of Program

Many educators assume that minority students bring a vast amount of knowledge of their community's history and culture with them when they enter the classroom. However, in our experiences we have found this is not the case. When students enter

our Chicano/Raza Studies classrooms in their junior year, they are veterans of surviving in a system that has historically oppressed and marginalized them. There are a myriad of reasons students choose our classes. Most are interested in learning about their culture, history, and stories, emphasizing that they have felt historically and culturally alienated as they have progressed through the educational system. However, we have also received many responses from students who have said they hate English or history and that this was their last effort toward remaining in school.

Both responses motivate a teacher to bring his or her best every day, but there is also immense pressure. The reality for many Chicano/a or Latino/a youth in our country is that school has rarely worked for them and they feel that it is not built for them to succeed. Our barrios and communities often perpetuate this feeling by claiming that academic success is acting “white.” Having internalized their oppression and formed these attitudes, it is crucial for the students in the beginning stages of their journey to look within themselves and their history to discover their humanity and academic identity. That was our challenge as we developed a teaching philosophy for our junior and senior classes.

Structure and Philosophy of Program

In the fall semester of 2003, Tucson High Magnet School made a significant commitment to address the needs of the Latino/a student community. For the first time in the school’s history, a humanities block of Chicano Studies/Literature courses was offered to students in lieu of American History and Junior English. The same twenty-five students were enrolled in history class with my teaching partner Sean Arce, as well as literature class with me. These classes were completely voluntary and remain so now.

Our senior-level classes were created when students petitioned the student body and gave a presentation to the THMS site council about the importance of extending the program to the senior level. There was a senior-level alternative to a traditional government class, but we had yet to create a literature component. The successful advocacy of students and community for both a government and literature class initiated the need to build one. Since the social studies class, the Social Justice Edu-

cation Project (SJEP), was based on the liberatory education philosophy of Paulo Freire and critical race theory (CRT), I decided the focus of our class should be social justice and resistance literature.

The themes and content of our junior year program are based on the history of Chicanos/as in America. This led to the introduction of the Xikano Paradigm, a model based on pre-Columbian philosophy that has shaped our curriculum. The Xikano Paradigm originates from the Aztec sun stone or *calendario* and the teachings of elders and *maestros* within our community. The use of the X and *k* in the word *Xikano* is to honor our indigenous roots.¹ For students to forge an academic identity and desire to learn, we base our study on four elements of historical and cultural importance to our pre-Columbian heritage. What follows is a brief description:

The reality for many Chicano/a or Latino/a youth in our country is that school has rarely worked for them and they feel that it is not built for them to succeed. Our barrios and communities often perpetuate this feeling by claiming that academic success is acting “white.”

- > **Tezkatlipoka**—self-reflection. Literally translated *Tezkatlipoka* means “the smoking mirror” and is a concept meaning memory as well as self-reflection. This represents the active journey to find our inner self. As when looking in a bathroom mirror covered in condensation, we must vigorously search for ourselves through the distractions and obstacles in our lives.
- > **Quetzalkoatl**—precious and beautiful knowledge. Learning about our history follows self-reflection. Gaining perspective on events and experiences that our ancestors endured allows us to become more fully realized human beings. As Marcus Garvey said, “A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.”
- > **Huitzilopochtli**—the will to act. *Huitzilopochtli* literally translates as “hummingbird to the left.” This is in reference to the heart being on the left side of the body and the hummingbird’s tenacity of work rate to fly and the strength of its will. It is also symbolic of the sun rising in the

wintertime. This concept has meaning for the will of a person or people to be positive, progressive, and creative.

- > *Xipe Totek*—transformation. Identified as our source of strength that allows us to transform and renew. We can achieve this transformation only when we have learned to have trust in ourselves.

The study of indigenous heritage becomes significant beyond the historical context; it is the framework for pursuing an education authentic to students' *raíces* or roots and their future journey. It is also essential to develop a different lens for the students to view the idea of education and academics because of their negative experiences within that system. The Xicano Paradigm emphasizes self-actualization and action to create a better community, a better world. This contrasts with the dominant message received by many students today, that education is a means to a high-paying job and power. The paradigm represents a cyclical process that is fluid and malleable like life and not a hierarchical or linear process. Different aspects can be embraced at different times of one's life, allowing us to refer to it throughout the education process.

Since most of the students take our junior-level courses, we continue the journey in the senior-level courses using the Xicano Paradigm. We also begin to study CRT in their SJEP class and confront major concepts, such as the basic CRT principle that race is a social construct used to maintain the current hegemony (Delgado and Stefancic 7). Narratives are also a critical component within CRT; stories construct meaning in our world, and many of the stories that generate the status quo do not accurately reflect the complex realities of minorities. Thus, a literature class is a perfect complement to CRT and the idea of studying and creating counternarratives (42–44). The literature we study during the senior year challenges mainstream assumptions and stereotypes.

Simultaneously, students learn how to focus the frustration they may have discovered from analyzing the status quo toward transformation of societal factors that negatively affect their realities. This is a Freirean concept that shapes the way for students to use the classroom as a social justice laboratory, where they are not only encouraged to critically analyze their world but also to develop the

skills to inspire change. This is also in line with the indigenous philosophy of *Huitzilopochtli* (the will to act) and *Xipe Totek* (transformation; rebirth). These two major concepts provide lenses through which to engage the history and literature in a contemporary context, rooted in social change.

Chicano/a and Resistance Literature

At the crux of our literature study during the junior year is Chicano/a work. In our quest to rehumanize students to the education experience, it is important to choose literature that reflects their lives, their families, and their history. As members of a historically oppressed community, many of our students have never had this opportunity, and it is much easier for them to visualize an academic identity for themselves when they read the work of their *gente*. Although I fervently believe in a multicultural approach to literature, and I specifically widen the literature study in the senior level, at the beginning the literature is Chicanocentric.

Early in the junior year, literature and writing assignments are built around the idea of self-reflection. Students discover that they identify with the characters or figures in the literature and that they have similar feelings of being marginalized by contemporary popular culture. They express this realization through a personal narrative examining the metaphor of borders or barriers within their lives. This self-reflective assignment not only follows the concept of *Tezkatlipoka* but is tremendously important in creating an academic space where student experiences are the focus of analysis.

While we continue to build academic identity in our classes through self-reflective narratives, it is also important to improve students' reading and writing abilities through literary analysis. As the year moves forward, we study and confront critical issues within the culture, such as machismo, youth violence, and sexism. We also study works that focus on the history of resistance within the Chicano/a community. Students continue to develop critical consciousness through analyzing literature representative of their heritage and history. Students see that school no longer exists outside of their experiences, and an academic identity emerges.

The senior year begins by reading a collection of contemporary short stories from Chicano/a

authors to establish a connection to the prior year. We hope to broaden their worldview by examining counternarratives from other perspectives. The stories we encounter shake the status quo and illuminate the diversity and complexity of life as a member of a historically oppressed population. We also analyze the tradition of resisting the status quo through rhetoric in the United States over the past fifty years, as we read speeches from a diverse group of individuals who have challenged the hegemony. The students write a rhetorical analysis of one of their favorites from the reading, as well as their own speeches that they may read to the student body in an assembly if they choose.

The last assignment of the year is examining the tradition of resistance within the world of poetry and hip-hop and creating a poem or “flow.” It is a perfect time to study the Harlem Renaissance, the poetry of the Xikano/a *movimiento*, as well as the contemporary poets that attempt to raise consciousness through hip-hop music, which builds further comfort and joy into the classroom space. Everyone is having fun, especially when we all have a chance to share our work in a poetry slam and hip-hop show in class.

A list of specific texts, genres, and assignments is provided in Figure 1.

Pedagogy: How It Works

The central idea behind Raza Studies pedagogy is love. Whether it is a love for our cultural heritage and the beauty of our *gente*, a love for learning, or the respect and love within our classrooms, it is love that is the seed for the tree. What is important to note about this concept is how it manifests itself in our classes. Love is high expectations and the belief that the students are capable of great things such as ethnographic research and rhetorical analysis. But it is also the understanding of where the students are in their academic journey, and an awareness of what Vygotsky termed *the zone of proximal development*, or the knowledge of exactly how far students can academically stretch while still being able to find success (86).

Love is also listening to the daily struggles in students’ lives and being fluid enough with the curriculum to accommodate the need for extensions on assignments while still building a work ethic that

will help students in their future academic pursuits. Above all else, it is a respect, an honesty that creates a bond and trust that will later fuel students’ ability to take academic risks that they never had the confidence or motivation to embrace before.

Cultivating this type of pedagogy is much easier because we have a “team.” In both the junior and senior curriculum at THMS, there are two classes that reflect the same ideas. The styles of the individual teachers may be different, but the core is the same—respect for students, love for learning, and passion to teach. So how does this look different from any other class? Since the students experience a team approach, the consistency lends itself more easily to creating a space where students feel comfortable. This is done through cooperative learning methods and self-identity lessons. At the start of the year, in both classes, students are exposed to a variety of self-reflection assignments that allow for their experiences outside of the classroom to shape the world that will be explored inside the classroom. Yes, we have units in mind to teach, which we have put much time into creating, but those first days are precious. And because our education experience includes two classes, the students begin to believe that this learning experience will actually be different, and a difference that they will enjoy. Whether they are writing a reflective letter, personal narrative, or identity poem, the students are the focus in both classes. Teachers’ modeling the assignments for them, as well as students’ sharing their work with classmates and volunteering to read their work to the class, is also an integral part of the first weeks of class. Meeting and sharing throughout the first quarter may seem to some as overkill; however, the results have told us something different.

Throughout the year, we continue to work in groups in both classes, and students receive experience in myriad roles, such as making PowerPoint presentations, writing group analyses, or creating artistic impressions of the unit of study. We attempt to build assignments that develop social, analytical,

Students continue to develop critical consciousness through analyzing literature representative of their heritage and history. Students come to see that school no longer exists outside of their experiences, and an academic identity emerges.

FIGURE 1. Resistance Literature Read in Xikano Literature/Raza Studies Classes

Literature	Genre	Themes in Focus	Writing Assignment
<i>Always Running: Gang Days in LA</i> by Luis J. Rodriguez	Memoir	Alienation Marginalization	Personal narrative— borders and barriers
"Woman Hollering Creek" and "Never Marry a Mexican" by Sandra Cisneros <i>La Llorona: Our Lady of Deformities</i> by Ramon García	Short Stories	Feminism Machismo Sexuality Gender roles	Literary analysis • Oppression of women • Feminism • Sexuality
Selections from <i>Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools</i> by Jonathan Kozol	Nonfiction	Inequality in education	Social justice research paper
<i>Zoot Suit</i> by Luis Valdez	Play	Resistance to hegemony	Character analysis
<i>So Far from God</i> by Ana Castillo	Novel	Chicanisma	Literary analysis
<i>The Devil's Highway: A True Story</i> by Luis Alberto Urrea	Nonfiction	Immigration Dehumanization Discrimination	Counternarratives— narratives that confront the status quo
Selections from <i>Drown</i> by Junot Díaz <i>Ten Little Indians</i> by Sherman Alexie <i>Woodcuts of Women</i> by Dagoberto Gilb <i>Loverboys: Stories</i> by Ana Castillo	Short Stories	Stereotypes of minorities Complexities of love	Literary analysis
Speeches by César Chávez, Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Martin Luther King Jr., and Dolores Huerta	Rhetoric	Resistance to status quo	Speeches Rhetorical analysis

and metaphorical skills. Shy students bristle at being asked to be group presenters, but eventually they understand it is their turn and that they are in a comfortable space that can support such a risk. Most of the time the students present as partners, and we are cognizant of balancing the groups by gender as well. By the end of their first semester, the students usually remind each other to create such balance.

As far as individual work, students are always able to hand in their assignments—always an open door for academic achievement. If an assignment is

late but the student wishes to finish the work, we encourage him or her. There are penalties for the tardiness, but as a team we believe it is more important to build a foundation of accomplishment and eliminate the zeroes in the grade book. Eventually, the experience of completing work becomes a habit. At times we make deals for the students to attend community events and write a synopsis or personal review of what they experienced as an extra-credit assignment. It is a sneaky way of broadening their academic experience. Since the

students feel as if we are doing them a favor, they do more for the class and themselves.

Perhaps the most important characteristic of our program is the ability to loop with the same students in successive years. Tucson High Magnet School has an enrollment of nearly three thousand students, so it is difficult to cultivate relationships with students that last through all four years. Our Raza Studies classes have illustrated the importance of creating a small school environment within such a system. The classes have a familial tone and it is not uncommon for students to call our cell phones and ask for help with an assignment or share an important development in their lives. Students, teachers, and parents often meet outside of class time to ensure that students and parents are being served to the best of our abilities. These evening meetings are largely organized by the teachers, but the actual content of what is shared rests completely with the students. It is their evening to demonstrate who they are and what they have become through their academic journey. I tend to think it is because of the trust they feel in our team that they are willing to expand their comfort zone beyond the classroom walls.

Transformation Projects

As the Xikano Paradigm suggests, once knowledge is gained (*Quetzalkoatl*), then it is our obligation to transform oppressive situations (*Xipe Totek*) through action (*Huitzilopochtli*). Thus, it is essential for our students to develop consciousness that will allow them to be critical of the constraints in their lives, in order to develop projects that address these issues and offer real change in our community.

Our first venture into the realm of social justice is when students begin their research paper as the culminating assignment for their junior year. To create an authentic research experience, students examine aspects of education funding, criminal justice influence on Latino/a youth, and poverty. We use these types of issues to build critical thought and to challenge the students to create plans that address the oppression. As they hone their analytical skills, the students begin to view their reality in a different light, and their research papers take a personal and authentic tone. They needn't focus on the topics we read in class, and they rarely do, as students have investigated health, immigration,

and racial profiling. As a requirement for their research they must also devise a plan that addresses the problems, inequities, or injustice they discovered. This is their first step toward the Freirian notions that frame their senior year.

Action is the concept addressed in our senior year. No longer do we remain penned into the classroom space as far as confronting oppressive situations. This year is built around using in-class discussions and analyses to define the problems in our country, city, and neighborhoods and then to take action. Freire called this process "problematization," and in our classrooms the students begin to develop Transformation Projects that address the problems they have defined (Darder 101). We achieve this through modeling and class discussion. Students brainstorm as a class and then are given the challenge of pitching their idea to their classmates. Since this is a continuation of the pedagogy from the junior year, there is never a shortage of volunteers. The students realize that this is their academic journey and relish the opportunity to shape their learning. Presentations are then made and the students rank which idea they prefer. Groups are formed from these rankings, and it is amazing how balanced the groups become. On rare occasions the students make their decision to be in a group with a friend; however, most of the time they follow their heart and their passion regardless of cliques or personal relationships. It is another example of the respect that the students have for one another within the classes.

Our projects resemble service education; they require students to take what they have learned in the classroom to the community and focus their efforts to change the world in which they live. I am able to connect this to our state's standards by requiring journals, evaluations, and a research paper on the process of creating a plan that will address their chosen problem. At the end of the first semester the students take over our classroom space and the eighty-five-minute class time to present their journey to the class, as well as an in-class activity and assignment focused on the issue they hope to transform. There is nothing more powerful than students teaching each other.

Students have worked on projects ranging from a documentary about how the issue of immigration affects their lives to workshops for parents about the realities and inequities of school funding.

I collect the data for each group in separate binders so that the next groups of students have further resources to create their projects. An example of our online magazine project and other student work can be found at <http://www.thexikanakalli.com> and <http://www.strippedmagazine.net>.

Tloke Nahuake (Together and United)

Since its inception in the fall of 2003, we have seen the program grow beyond our capacity to offer enough classes. Currently, we have eleven Raza Studies classes—six sections of junior literature and history and five sections of senior literature and government. In less than four years, we have five times the number of classes. Students are our staunchest supporters and advocates. The program has grown because students are committed to it and are fully aware of how these experiences have changed their lives.

Our students are regular presenters at youth conferences, in other schools in our district, and at the University of Arizona. They have been invited guests to address our school board and helped organize our annual immigration marches in Tucson. They have blown away the test-score gap between themselves and their European American peers. Yet, with all those amazing experiences, what stands out to me is the way the students love one another and cherish their educational journey. They are proud of what they have accomplished and have abandoned apathy for passion and hope. They are proof that a humanizing experience within education can counteract the years of marginalization, alienation, and oppression that students have suffered in schools.²

Curtis Acosta is a Xikano educator and a New Jack Scholar dedicated to resisting the hegemony throughout our world. email: curtis.acosta@tusd1.org.

Notes

1. The etymology of *Xikano*, which evolved into *Chicano*, demonstrates our history. The “Aztecs” referred to themselves as the *Mexika* (pronounced Meh-shee-ka). The people were then called *Mexikanos* (Meh-shee-ka-nos). Shortened, the word was *Xikanos*. Because the Spanish colonizers could not pronounce it correctly, the pronunciation of *Mexikanos* became Meh-hee-ka-nos. The pronunciation of *Xikano* returns us to ancestral roots by restoring the Nahuatl pronunciation of X as *sh*.

2. Special thanks to my colleagues Sean Arce, Norma Ballesteros, and José Gonzalez for helping me with the Xikano Paradigm section, and Augustine Romero for his vision and commitment to our students in leading the Raza Studies Department. Thank you, also, to Dr. Eliane Rubenstein-Ávila for her support in the writing of this paper.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

LISA STORM FINK, RWT

Acosta reminds us of the importance of a student's identity and its role in the classroom. “Assessing Cultural Relevance: Exploring Personal Connections to a Text” invites students to evaluate a nonfiction or realistic fiction text for its cultural relevance to themselves personally and as a group. Students search for additional, relevant texts; each chooses one; and students write reviews of the texts that they chose. This lesson is an especially powerful choice for English language learners. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=1003