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Volunteers Needed: Bridging Latino Immigrants and Local Communities Through Service Learning and Critical Analytic Practice Ethnography

Diana M. Ruggiero

Abstract

This essay presents a brief ethnography of a small Latino community in Tennessee and their interaction with local volunteers following a disastrous flood that occurred in July 2014. The ethnography, in this case in the form of a screenplay, depicts the overall intercultural sensitivity of the volunteers, the affected, and the interpreters. In the process, this essay also considers such creative analytic practice (CAP) ethnographies may help students involved in Spanish and community service-learning courses as well as communities bridge the “self”/“other” gap that so often distances Latino immigrants and locals.

It is well known that migrant populations contend with numerous challenges in their adopted society, from secondary citizenship and discrimination to cultural differences. This exclusion is exacerbated, if not caused, by language barriers. Indeed, as scholars in the social sciences have long noted (e.g., Hill, 1995, 2008), it is often language that demarcates the difference between “us” and “other.” Unfortunately, this polarizing form of thinking can be extremely detrimental to the progress of both marginalized and dominant populations within a city. When we fail to realize that we do indeed have new residents who are monolingual in Spanish and then ignore the needs that this population has, we are not only doing a disservice to them but to the population in general in that we reify and maintain the very structural differences that keep Latinos in an undesirable and marginal position in relation to the dominant society (see, for example, Gomberg-Muñoz, 2011).

As a language professor with community service-learning courses, I cannot help but attend to the needs of Latino immigrants and connect students with this reality. While grammar instruction and cultural activities such as dancing salsa and eating at a Mexican restaurant are valid forms of teaching and learning Spanish, learning a foreign language also entails applying the language in the context of daily life. For me, this means visiting a local community and using the language as much as possible in a positive and beneficial manner. Though situating language use within a lived context can be achieved through study abroad, an immersive language experience can likewise often be accomplished within one’s own local community. The benefits in this case, however, extend well be-

yond the individual student and the development of language abilities.

This essay chronicles an actual event that took place during the week of July 1, 2014 in Memphis, Tennessee, a city of more than 650,000 residents, following flooding in June. Demographically, the city is majority African American (63.3%) and Caucasian (29.4%), with a growing Latino population (6.5%) for which there are few resources in this heavily monolingual city (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/47/4748000.html>).

The events deal with the aftermath of a period of unseasonably heavy rainfall during the month of June. There was major flooding and aid was needed throughout the city. Many agencies, such as the Red Cross, were there to aid those who needed it, but as the Red Cross is staffed locally, they reflected the demographic majority of the city; there were very few, if any, Spanish speakers available. This created a huge need for third party interpreters who could speak both English and Spanish and help the affected families receive aid. This third party was vital to the success of both parties by being a bridge across the language barrier.

Language differences provided enough of a barrier for the disaster relief team that the process to receive aid was stalled to the point of barely functioning. The need for bilingual volunteers was vital, but the availability and turnout was abysmally low. Agencies that exist to bridge the gap between the two communities were working overtime to get the word out and to find those willing to volunteer their services. Emails were sent and social media was alerted, but despite this there were very few people willing to help. Some of the responses were that the holiday was approaching and there was no time;

others were that they had no confidence in their Spanish speaking ability. Both responses, while seemingly reasonable, were in fact forms of further exclusion of the communities. Such responses are understandable given that being a formal interpreter takes several years of training; however, for this cause, all that was required of the volunteers was assistance with a form that was already bilingual (Spanish-English). Issues that arise commonly in this situation are the ability to read and write on the part of the Spanish speaking residents.

During the week of July 1, 2014, I was able to help with interpreting and also to pass out cleaning kits for homes damaged by the flood. From observations and personal experience during the event, the jobs were very simple and straightforward; they were about helping to ease the fear for those affected and to provide help through the aid process. This required at minimum an intermediate command of the language. For those who passed out the cleaning kits, a beginning Spanish level or less was required. The questions were the same, and with the correct teacher anyone could successfully parrot the sentences. That is to say, anyone with the desire to help would have not only been welcomed, but much needed and of great service. Those who showed up found a lively community that, despite the devastation, continued to remain optimistic. The community was an open place, and they continued to do the best they could while supporting one another. The children were running around and playing and neighbors were sharing what little they had. There was some worry that permeated the air, some unease and fear...worries about where to go, what would come next for them, and how they would be able to pick up and carry on. There was a tangible tension in the air, mostly in the form of questions such as: How are the damages going to be paid for? What aid will the management of the housing community affected by the flood give? But mostly the community was grateful for the help and the assurance that things would get better.

Though the language skills required to assist the Red Cross in this particular case were indeed minimal, it was perhaps the relative cultural awareness and sensitivity of the interpreters that made more of a difference in serving the affected families as shown below. It is perhaps here, at the intersection of community service-learning and language instruction, that language instructors such as myself can make a lasting contribution toward the betterment of society.

Indeed, the service-learning approach to the acquisition of a foreign language is an approach

that I would have previously benefited from before the incident of the week of July 1, 2014. Prior experience with such a disaster relief event within the community would have quelled the butterflies in the pit of my stomach. As it so happened, I had not taken any service-learning courses as a student. It becomes very difficult to ease another person's fears as your fears and misgivings run rampant. There was not enough preparation in the world for the emotional impact of the job that I was to perform. As previously noted, the translation and transcription of information to the form was not in and of itself difficult. The hardest part was occupying a neutral territory, reminiscent of Homi Bhabha's (1994) "third space," as a Latina and naturalized U.S. citizen with first-hand knowledge of the trepidation and uncertainty that comes with being an immigrant and an immigrant in need of assistance amid crisis. It was unsettling knowing that, at the end of the day, I could return to my cozy home when the homes of those I was helping, those I identified with in many ways more than with my fellow neighbors, were destroyed by the flood.

Following this experience, I realized that I needed a productive way to help me process what I had encountered and experienced. I also realized that, if this were the case for me as a Latina, than certainly my own students could and would also benefit from similarly creatively processing their service-learning experiences. Rather than journal, I opted to create a creative analytic practice (CAP) ethnography to represent what I had observed and encountered during a total of 12 hours worth of volunteer work and observation. My experiences were additionally informed by in-depth interviews with those affected by the flood and with the director of Latino Memphis. The brief screenplay presented below exemplifies the dialogs and interactions that occurred during volunteer hours.

CAP Ethnography: The Screenplay

The term "creative analytic practice ethnographies" was coined by Laurel Richardson to refer to a host of interpretive processes informing research and representation in the social sciences and humanities following the postmodern turn (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Though hardly new, the various forms of creative ethnographic representations now practiced across different disciplines and fields share a fundamental concern with the nature of social reality, the subjective positioning of the researcher, and the relationship between the researcher and those being researched. What CAP ethnography offers is a way of approaching

and representing social reality that is perhaps most reflective of the way reality is actually experienced in everyday life; as heterogeneous, contested, and contradictory.

I was drawn to CAP ethnography, and specifically screenplay writing (as a form of CAP ethnography), in part as a result of my experience with the service-learning course, but also because of its potential to draw audiences into the interpretive process. As Nathaniel Kohn (2000) notes in his observations about the collaborative and dialogic nature of screenplay writing, the format of the screenplay encourages academics to treat their writings as an open dialogue. The screenplay requires openness to critique and frankness that traditional academic writing does not often employ (aside from the peer review process). It also invites the audience to share the sights, feelings, and sounds of the characters that it portrays, as well as in the final interpretation. By helping the reader contextualize everyday activities and the emotion behind them, the use of the screenplay as a creative analytic practice allows for the evocation of the human element within research. It also allows for a potential transformative experience for both the writer and the audience in that it necessitates active engagement on both parts in elucidating meaning from the text. This is especially important when considering the politics surrounding the issue of immigration and Latinos in the United States.

The screenplay excerpt (see Appendix A), then, is written with the intention of inviting audiences to reflect on their encounters with Latino immigrants as well as with their experience of natural disasters, loss, and need. They are called to think past their stereotypes, preconceptions, and beliefs concerning Latinos and the issue of immigration and to empathize with the struggle and humanity of the people affected by the flood (both victims and aid workers).

(Editor's Note: At this point in the text, we recommend that you go to the end of the document and read the screenplay excerpt, Page 45.)

Regarding the choice of presenting the screenplay in both Spanish and English, Richardson (2005) explains that “language is a constitutive force, creating a particular view of reality” (p. 960) and that it is tied to the idea that the ethnographer cannot be separated from who he/she is; thus the play was originally written in Spanish (my first language).

The screenplay excerpt, though brief, depicts a telling exchange between a Red Cross volunteer, interpreter, and Latino family, and captures the greater function of interpreter as cultural interpreter. The Red Cross volunteer in this case, though humane in his/her treatment of the flood victims, necessarily acts within strict boundaries and guidelines dictated by the task assigned—in this case, processing claim forms and handing out cleaning kits. Mr. Lopez, in dire need of assistance extending far beyond what the Red Cross could offer, is understandably nervous and wary of approaching and divulging personal information to the Red Cross. Indeed, though the status of Mr. Lopez is left unspoken, it is presumed on the part of the Red Cross volunteer that he is undocumented. The reasons for Mr. Lopez’ reticence, however, may be a result of numerous factors, an element of the screenplay left open to interpretation and debate. The end result, however, is that there is a deep mistrust of authority, despite the fact that an organization like the Red Cross transcends national boundaries (as the volunteer worker alludes to in his/her comment regarding his/her unconcern with the place of origin of Mr. Lopez’s document). Into this scene where much is left unspoken the interpreter enters.

Though speaking little in the script itself, the interpreter plays a crucial role in mediating and bridging the divide between the two distinct social realities represented here by the Red Cross volunteer and Mr. Lopez. Though there to help, the Red Cross volunteer inadvertently alienates Mr. Lopez in two interrelated ways: by failing to acknowledge and respond to his particular story and concern for his daughter as well as by denying him agency in assigning him to a preconceived and generic category (or categories) distinct and opposite from that occupied by the Red Cross volunteer (i.e., victim, Latino, foreigner/immigrant, undocumented/illegal, and “other”). Mr. Lopez’s alienation is further exacerbated by yet another major factor; the language barrier. The interpreter in this case becomes the voice and therefore means of agency for Latinos such as Mr. Lopez. Thus even though the task of the interpreter in this scenario is rather banal (communicating the content and meaning of a form already written in Spanish), the significance of the interpreter’s role as a mediator navigating the power dynamics inherent in the space between the Red Cross volunteer and Mr. Lopez is greatly heightened and cannot be understated.

The impact of the gulf between the Red Cross and the Latinos affected by the flood and of the relative weight of the responsibility we (mean-

ing myself and my students) had assumed during this service-learning project was overwhelming. Horror, sorrow, compassion, guilt, shame, and anger coupled with an intense sense of urgency in my desire and determination to help were but a few of the emotions that overtook me. I vividly recall a woman with five children pleading with me to take her youngest, an infant, home with me for the evening, so damaged was her home. With tears in my eyes, I returned to her the child she had placed in my arms as the Red Cross volunteers adamantly shook their heads and sternly warned us: "Unless you have room for them all, do not take anyone home with you." We were pained by the limitations of our role. Yet, we also knew that we were providing something far greater than interpreting skills and cleaning kits: We provided a human element to an otherwise cold and alienating process. We listened when the Red Cross could not. We navigated cultural differences that could have potentially led to misunderstanding, anger, and further mistrust. And in so doing, we advocated and provided a voice for an otherwise voiceless "other" in a potentially dehumanizing moment of crisis and need.

Perhaps it was the overwhelming sense of voicelessness and the desire to give voice to the families affected by the flood that led me to process my experience through the form of a screenplay. I now realize that the reality or truth of this experience lies in neither the voice of the Red Cross volunteers, the Latino families, nor the interpreter alone, but somewhere between them as well as between what transpired during the event (my memory creatively captured in the screenplay) and my reflection and reading of the event now several months later. The process has been at once illuminating, therapeutic, and cathartic on an intellectual and personal level.

Though journals are indeed valuable tools for processing such experiences, I contend that CAP ethnographies like the screenplay offer teachers and students undertaking similar service-learning projects a unique opportunity to unpack, reflect on, and critically assess their experiences in a personally meaningful way. Within my own class, the screenplay and its actual performance by the students (using different readings or interpretations of the roles) provided a rich space for exploring the role, responsibilities, and significance of language interpreters. It also served as a launching point for deep and meaningful conversations about the social, cultural, and political conditions and dynamics surrounding Latino immigrant communities, as well as about disaster relief and the nature of the

relationship between the Latino community and local, national, and transnational service providers. It also reminded us of our individual responsibilities within our own communities to look after and care for one another in times of distress and need, regardless of language, culture, or any other social barriers that may exist. As my class concluded by the end of the semester, we are all human beings, not categories and labels to be checked off on a form; and just as we are all liable to be in a position of need, we are all also capable of lending assistance. Following this service-learning experience, I am confident that my students will not hesitate to respond to the call: "Volunteers needed."

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About the Author

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Appendix A. Screenplay Excerpt

SCREENPLAY IN SPANISH

Un carro nos lleva por una avenida y vemos de paso a muchas casas a la derecha que están muy abandonadas, viejas y caídas. Entramos en un gate y ahí nos piden una identificación. Estacionamos frente a un edificio que está al lado de la piscina. En frente, muchas casas rodantes están mojadas, con olor a humedad. Mucha ropa está fuera secándose con lo que queda del sol de la tarde. Entramos al edificio.

VOLUNTARIA DE LA CRUZ ROJA

¿Cómo está? Gracias por venir a ayudarnos.

INTÉRPRETE

Si, claro, está bien.

VOLUNTARIA DE LA CRUZ ROJA

Bueno, vamos a comenzar, estamos llamando por nombre en orden de llegada.

SEÑOR LOPEZ

Hola, gracias por la ayuda. Vengo porque mi casa se llenó de agua, casi no salimos, estamos muy mal. Mi hija está enferma y el olor a humedad ya no se aguanta.

VOLUNTARIA DE LA CRUZ ROJA

¿Qué está diciendo?

INTÉRPRETE

Está diciendo que hubo agua dentro de su casa y que su hija no está bien...

VOLUNTARIA DE LA CRUZ ROJA

(interrumpiendo)

Bueno pero tenemos que llenar el formulario para que pueda cobrar el dinero del daño.

INTÉRPRETE

Está bien.

VOLUNTARIA DE LA CRUZ ROJA

Vamos a comenzar, ¿Me puede dar una identificación?

El Señor Lopez no está feliz, no sabe que hacer. El necesita calmarse, sabe que no tiene una identificación y piensa que alguien lo puede deportar. La voluntaria se da cuenta de su miedo.

VOLUNTARIA DE LA CRUZ ROJA

No se preocupe, no somos el gobierno, solo somos una organización de voluntarios, queremos ayudarlo.

INTÉRPRETE

Señor Lopez, muestre lo que tenga, hasta un pasaporte de su país de origen. Todo va a estar bien, solo queremos ayudarlo. Estamos para servirle.

SCREENPLAY IN ENGLISH

A car takes us on a main road. We pass many houses on the right. They are very abandoned, old and falling apart. We enter a gate and they ask for an ID. We park in front of a building that is next to a swimming pool. Across the street there are many trailers that are wet and musty. Many clothes are drying outside with what is left of the afternoon sun. We enter the building.

RED CROSS VOLUNTEER

How are you? Thanks for coming to help.

INTERPRETER

Yeah, sure, no problem!

RED CROSS VOLUNTEER

Well, let's start, we are calling them by order of arrival.

Mr. Lopez

Hi, thanks for the help. I'm here because my house was filled with water. We almost did not make it out of the house before the water started to get in, we are not ok. My daughter is sick and we can't stand the musty smell any longer.

RED CROSS VOLUNTEER

What is he saying?

INTERPRETER

He is saying that there was water inside his house and that his daughter is not well...

RED CROSS VOLUNTEER

(Interrupting)

Good, but we need to fill in the form so you can collect money for the damage.

INTERPRETER

It's OK.

RED CROSS VOLUNTEER

Let's start, Can you show me an ID?

Mr. Lopez is not happy. He does not know what to do. He needs to calm down, he knows he has no identification, and he is afraid someone might be deported. The Volunteer realizes his fear.

RED CROSS VOLUNTEER

Do not worry. We are not the government. We are just an organization of volunteers, we want to help.

INTERPRETER

Mr. Lopez, show what you have, even a passport from your country of origin. Everything will be fine. They just want to help you. We are here to serve you.