



Journal of Religion & Society

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ISSN: 1522-5658

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The Kripke Center

Volume 2 (2000)

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## Teaching and Practice

### Experiential Education and the Transformation of Liberation Theology

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#### Finding Reality

A few years back a bunch of us were sitting around talking about California's new legislation on illegal aliens. We were tossing around ideas about right and wrong, fair and unfair, and one of my friends broke in. "My God, listen to how you sound! You are talking about borders keeping people out, who deserves emergency medical care, and education, and is there enough to go around. Can you hear how you sound?" . . .

Ever since that day, I think, "How do I sound, what am I saying?" I listen for the catch phrases "I'm sorry, but . . . Maybe this sounds insensitive, but . . . Maybe this is selfish, but . . ." And I've learned, if it sounds that way, it is.<1>

[1] For years I have been trying to root the study of liberation theology in an examination of the lives and struggles of the Latin America communities that first generated this form of theological reflection. I have found no completely successful way of connecting North American students to contexts far removed from their experiences. We have viewed documentary films of base communities in Brazil and the popular film, "Romero." I selected Manlio Argueta's novel, *One Day of Life*, because it explores, more compellingly than any other work I know, the subtle dynamics of conscientization in the life of a peasant woman. Long ago, I shifted from a heavy emphasis on the works of leading Latin American theologians and, instead, worked with ethnographic and sociological studies of base communities struggling to find their own voice, such as Daniel Levine's *Popular Voices in Latin American Catholicism*. More recently, we have read Nancy Scheper-Hughes' *Death Without Weeping* to understand the way everyday violence plagues the lives of urban Brazilians.

[2] Each of these efforts has helped some students to recognize the tangled web that links their lives with Latin American communities to the benefit of a few and the misery of many. Yet the question asked by one student, "Is any of this real?" characterizes the sense of many students that, at best, they are looking at their fellow human beings through a glass darkly.

[3] This essay focuses upon three efforts that I have made over the past four years to transform the teaching of liberation theology. First, I will examine the development of a linkage between the Liberation Theology course and a follow-up study trip to the Sonora, Mexico/Arizona borderlands to examine the social and ecological conditions fostered by global economic forces. Second, I will look at the transformation of the Liberation Theology course itself into a "service learning" course. Finally, I will analyze the use of a HyperNews electronic threaded discussion group through which the students themselves were able to take over the teaching and practice of the course.

#### Life on the Border

if we could remember  
we are siblings

no borders would exist

but now steel plate gulf war abundance  
hangs infrared surveillance spy cameras  
between our embrace,  
we are american.  
you are mexican.  
we are rich.  
you are poor.  
you are not me.  
our borders are definite.

church gates, great walls, nation-states  
are guarded with Israeli ammunition, Russian AK's and capitalist dollars  
defending the right to life, liberty and justice -  
for just us.<2>

[4] My first step in transforming the course occurred when I connected in 1994 with BorderLinks, a non-profit educational organization in Nogales, Sonora and Tucson, Arizona. An outgrowth of the Sanctuary movement in Tucson, BorderLinks conducts programs for church groups, ecological activists, labor unions, seminary and college students, and others who wish to examine the one place on the globe where the industrialized world directly collides with the Third World.<3> Working with BorderLinks, I shaped an inexpensive ten-day study trip where students would live with families in the *colonias* surrounding Nogales, visit the *maquiladora* (assembly plants) scattered along the border, hold discussions with members of the Sanctuary movement as they charted a course for their movement in the 1990s, and discuss border conditions with members of Christian base communities, public officials, journalists, ecological and labor activists, and the Border Patrol.<4>

[5] Between one-third and one-half of the students in sections of the Liberation Theology course have also taken the BorderLinks study trip. Liberation theology provides the students with the theoretical framework to understand the border as the crucible of globalization, the place where you are caught up in its swirl of contradictions. They come to the border ready to think systemically. The course also creates a horizon of liberation within which our questions of and discussions with those who accept the processes of globalization and the chaos of life along the border as fated realities become strikingly charged. Conversely the sequencing of the Liberation Theology course and the study trip means that I give far more attention in liberation theology to the forms of structural violence characteristic of the last ten years rather than to the patterns of state terrorism of the decade of the 1980s.

[6] Most importantly, the students who have taken the trip have found an anchorage in their own experience for understanding global poverty. They internalized a visceral sense of both the immensity of the everyday violence that confronts all of the border dwellers and of the spiritual strength of the base community members who persist in their struggles against that violence. Key themes in our Liberation Theology course retroactively caught fire with these students when we saw them enacted along the border. For example, one of our trip leaders on two occasions was Cecilia Guzman, a lifetime resident of Nogales, Sonora who worked for years as a pastoral leader until forced out of her position by a conservative pastor. Cecilia also has been a social worker with a long term involvement in the network of Nogales' social agencies. Now she works on both sides of the border educating North Americans and Mexicans alike. We learned much more about an unassuming, faith-based persistence in working for change from Cecilia than we ever did from the often inflated claims made in the theological literature on behalf of base communities. When we met with Groupa Beta, an elite cadre of Mexican police trained by the Border Patrol and ostensibly designed to counter corruption of the border, many students raised concerns about news reports of police brutality on both sides of the border. Their questions were met with a polished PR response intended to exonerate Groupa Beta of all culpability. After we left our meeting, Cecilia said quietly that we were lied to, that she herself, in her work with street kids living a chaotic life in the tunnels under the border, had seen the physical marks of Groupa Beta's handiwork. Cecilia who has worked with base communities all along the Arizona/Sonora border offered no utopian pronouncements, just the record of a life of commitment lived with unassuming integrity. No wonder that student after student commented in their journals that when they think of liberation theology, they think of Cecilia.

[7] Another focus of the Liberation Theology course has been trying to disentangle the relationship of liberation theology to Evangelical Christians from the stereotypical presentations of one side or the other. These discussions about the conflicts between Catholic base communities and Evangelicals took on added weight when we witnessed the "highjacking" of a base community Bible discussion by Evangelical



prisoner-witness inside a Mexican prison. This experience appeared to us to be a blind collision with neither side remotely comprehending the other. But it did bring home to us the divergent strengths of these movements all too frequently locked in opposition.<5>

[8] Perhaps the biggest change brought about by connecting the Liberation Theology course to the BorderLinks trip has been in me. I said after I returned from my first trip that I had expected to learn a great deal about the border and even something about liberation theology but I did not expect to learn how to teach. In part, this learning process involved the borrowing of techniques of reflection from BorderLinks trip-leaders to turn often overwhelming personal experiences into powerful learning events. But my own transformation went further. Going back again and again to the same place, living and talking with many of the same people as they struggle to keep their families intact, experiencing the ways, subtle and dramatic, in which globalization undermines daily family life - the sick children all over the *colonia* as winter sets in, the sullen teenager hacking away at a piece of furniture in his home with a butcher's knife, an overworked father's hacking cough - burned away all abstract moral reasoning far more effectively than any reading of Carol Gilligan.<6> I no longer obsess about whether I am turning the "academic" study of one form of theology into a forced conversion process. The border with all of its complexities demands my and my students' full intelligence. The border and its people elicit our deep passion and compassion.

### Service Learning and The Practice of Liberation

and the most real moment is stepping outside.  
How much weight do you think there could be  
in one instant (crushing-guilt-instant) -  
the certain knowledge of  
the possibility that you won't change  
your life having seen what you've seen  
- what do you do? - ?

Just enough  
is                      always  
                                 not                      enough.<7>

[9] A study trip to Nogales, however, was never possible for more than half of the students in the Liberation Theology class. So, I have looked for ways to provide all of the students with an experiential touchstone. I turned to service learning because it was part of my University's renewed commitment to social engagement. But, more importantly, I did so because it is a pedagogy that intentionally brings together theory and practice. Students engaged in some academic inquiry are placed in community-based social agencies and given responsibilities that fit, so far as possible, with the content of the course. Not only do students perform regular service over the course of the semester but classes are structured so that students have the opportunity to reflect together on their service involvement. Part of the task of the teacher is to coax the students into linking theory and practice. In my Liberation Theology course the large majority of students were involved in teaching English as a Second Language, and in some cases citizenship training and basic computer-skills classes, in a storefront center sponsored by the Heartland Alliance in a Latino/a neighborhood of Chicago. Just as significantly the nature of the course demands a connection with actual social engagement. Trying to teach this course simply within the walls of the academy had become for me something in the nature of directing a silent film on the life of Mozart.

[10] When I began the process of turning the course into a service learning course, the question, "Is any of this real?" changed. Students never questioned the *reality* of their service context, but they began to question many other things: "What does service have to do with liberation? Does it aid or impede it?" "What is liberation anyhow? What do these utopian dreams have to do with the daily struggles of the people I serve?"<8> "What are the limits of charitable actions?" "What are the limits of action in pursuit of social justice?" And on and on. The course became "real" because the questions - each one of them directly related to the core issues of the course - arose out of an actual struggle on the part of the students to learn while serving.

[11] Look, for example, at the range of issues represented in a single, opening journal entry by a student working on a Salvation Army food distribution project.

We handed out sandwiches and apples and juice to ANYONE who came up to the van. We fed prostitutes, pimps, kids, mechanics, moms, grandmas, homeless guys, crack addicts, and drug dealers. Sometimes people would say thanks and seem really grateful and sometimes they would



get really mad and swear at us when we didn't give them 2 or 3 sandwiches. It was hard work. After 4+ hours, I was exhausted and found myself looking forward to getting home.

I don't know. I don't know about this. I don't think I like this type of community service. It didn't feel good. Well, it felt good to give the kids food knowing that they probably don't have food at home. But no one's life was changed. No one's situation was changed. Perhaps, our feeding program helps people to not change their situation. It's just no[t] enough, giving people something to eat, then driving away. I'm not sure what I think.

I also feel distinctly separate from the people that come to the van. THEY come to OUR van and WE give THEM food. Then THEY go away and WE go away. We've all got a sense of US and THEM and I don't know how to even begin to go about breaking that down. Sometimes there was casual conversation between us. Sometimes there was hostile conversation. But there was never meaningful conversation. I had hoped to walk away from my first night out feeling energized and excited and eager for more. I'm none of those things. . .

At first, I thought any changes that will take place on the south side must come from public policy. . . There is a new one underway I just learned about from my public policy friend. He told me the area where the feeding program runs has been labeled an official empowerment zone. This means that millions of dollars will be poured into the south side and community members and business owners in the community decide where it will go and what it will be used for. I was skeptical when I heard this because so many similar programs have failed, precisely because they do not attack the real issue, which I believe is racism. I'm seeing its effects first hand. And experiencing racism within myself as I try not to see each person that approaches our van as a crack addict. But, it looks to me like crack addiction on the south side is just another branch of the racism tree.

The limits and ambiguity of charity. Questions about the "deserving versus underserving" poor and the awareness of how those questions are rooted in a history of racism. Charitable service versus altering social structures. The limits of public policies and projects in a society warped by racism. Doing something *for* and *to* others versus creating meaningful bonds that transcend class and race boundaries. Just to get students to recognize this tangle of issues and their interconnection ordinarily was the labor of the entire course. Yet here they were, passionately articulated, the fruit of a single night of service.

[12] What transformed the Liberation Theology course was not simply that the students were able to *do* something, to apply their skills to real problems. They were asked to engage in a process of transformation which took place over time and which demanded both internal and external change. The students I taught confronted themselves as much as they questioned their social context; they challenged their own level of commitment to lasting change as much as they did the more utopian elements of the course's theoretical framework. A journal entry by a second student whose service was teaching an ESL class provides a glimpse of this transformation:

Melissa and I taught together again. I think that we are a really nice balance, although I think she might get frustrated with me at times. Today she forced me to teach the class. I think she was tired of taking the initiative and feeling like she was doing all of the work. Which is not what I thought I was doing, but it was that whole scared to take charge and lead thing. Which is funny because in other situations, I have no problem being the leader. I think it's because this is an environment in which I feel like a real novice. But the more I keep teaching the more I am realizing that it is a privilege to be in an environment in which everyone speaks my language and the majority of which have my culture. The reason this ESL class feels so risky is because it is not an environment in which I move. They have to enter my environment (that of dominant English-speaking culture, and by extension Anglo, middle class, etc.) just about everyday, but I never have to enter their environment.

So I'm changing the way I look at this class. I am no longer looking at it like it is an assignment . . . but like it is a responsibility. It [is] a personal responsibility of mine to enter environments which I do not have to. It is my responsibility as a white, English speaking person, to have contact with those that do not speak English. This is a concrete way of making my personal commitment to decentering whiteness a part of my everyday life. By not moving in a world that is all white and all English speaking, I am crossing language border and cultural borders. . . As much [as] our "Liberation Theology" class has raked ESL through the coals, I think that is a really awesome thing.

[13] The service context demanded of these students that they engage in a *practice*. Alasdair MacIntyre and socially-engaged Buddhists, among others, have developed sophisticated understandings of practice which liberation theologians might well use. For our purposes, any coherent set of actions which flow



from an internalized value framework and not merely from instrumental goals, which impose a discipline upon the self, and link interdependently inner and outer transformation may be called a practice.<9>

A monk asked Dong-shan: "Is there a practice for people to follow?" Dong-shan answered: "When you become a real person, there is such a practice" (Snyder: 185).

Gary Snyder's version of a traditional Zen aphorism conveys succinctly the innermost trajectory of this student's struggle. By sticking to a difficult task she a) shifted her moral focus from an externally imposed obligation (class assignment) to an internally imposed responsibility ("my personal commitment to decentering whiteness"), b) recognized that the key obstacle to teaching well was less her relative lack of skill than her own ego and went to work on both and c) engaged in a pattern of self-transcending action for the sake of both herself and others ("crossing language and cultural borders").

[14] This struggle is also linked with the narratives of Columbian and Venezuelan peasants that have perplexed virtually all of my students in every section of the Liberation Theology class that I have taught in the past eight years. In case after case Daniel Levine shows how ordinary peasants simultaneously became literate and aware of how oppression has been constructed and enacted in their lives. Nurtured by base communities, they emerged as local leaders. While these personal transformations have been profound, a clear-sighted analysis of Columbian and Venezuelan social context would conclude that no dramatic change has occurred or if it has, it has been for the worse. And yet as one Venezuelan concludes, "I have had an historic life" (Levine: 272-313, 363).

[15] It is this simple declaration that has puzzled my students. It has been our collective *koan*. As one who came of age as a minor participant in the civil rights movement, I know in my bones what it means. My students do not. The ameliorative power of personal involvement appears self-evident but the power of the self-in-community to effect historical change seems utterly illusory. In many cases the service involvement remained at the level of interpersonal amelioration; in a few, especially when the service was held in tension with more overtly political involvements, a shift to a new level took place.

I want to write about my experiences this weekend at the School of the Americas vigil in Georgia . . . I found myself thinking on several occasions throughout the weekend, "I am leading an historic life," which again got me thinking about what it means to lead an historic life. All I was doing, after all, was standing somewhere the federal government says I can't be. I've done this a number of times before but the "historic life" thing never struck me. This class has caused me to think a great deal about action vs. presence - how are they different, how are they similar, which is more effective, etc. This weekend I made the connection between presence and solidarity, which I don't think is as inherent between action and solidarity. To me, teaching ESL has been about action, and I've come to the conclusion that I'm simply more comfortable with presence-as-action. Here, solidarity is implicit, and I believe that solidarity is key to liberation. Indeed, considering the conversion to the neighbor and the creation of utopia, solidarity may be synonymous with liberation, at least on some level. The chance to create that with 7000 other people was amazing. However, perhaps it resonates with me more simply because it's so much more dramatic? I probably need to work a lot harder on creating solidarity where it's not ready-made: if the fact that I go home to Lincoln Park each week after ESL means that solidarity is not implicit, perhaps that means I need to work harder to establish it.

The way in which the classic themes of liberation theologies are alive in this student's experience needs no commentary. If liberation theology as a subject and, for that matter, Religious Studies as a field, have something distinctive to offer, it is this sense of the subtle dynamics of genuine transformation and an awareness of its paradoxes.

[16] All proponents of service learning adamantly insist that the fundamental reason for introducing a service component into a course is that it improves learning (Eyler and Giles). I discovered that my students think more clearly about religiously-motivated change when they themselves are engaged in a practice. So let me end this section with one student's very astute observation about the complexities and ambiguities of social engagement.

Since the beginning of this service learning experience, I've been having a good deal of internal conflict about our service work as perpetuation of unjust social structures - despite the fun I may be having in class with the ESL students. I cringe when I hear the citizenship teacher in the cubicle next to mine speaking about freedom of religion and the right to peaceful assembly. I've been feeling pretty uneasy about what we're doing. I just received in the mail, however, a bookmark from a friend on which is written a number of scriptural passages from various religious traditions,









presence in many of our students' lives. Second, this student's comments on dating indicate that the theory/practice dialectic that liberation theologians love to talk about abstractly must somehow become in her words "analysis in everyday life."

[23] The second entry recognizes the pain at the heart of any practice. It also reflects the labor of this particular student in moving from the recognition of alienation to the possibility of liberation.

I saw "Men With Guns" this past weekend, also. What a great movie touching so purposefully vaguely on so many big, often unrecognized issues. One thing that struck me particularly was the doctor's realization that in trying to do good, contribute to or change his country, he actually hurt/killed people. He made a mistake. I think in the lives of many of us, the roads we are aiming to follow are so unclear, that sometimes in our best intentions we may be only contributing to evils we are intending to fight. I think we have to swallow, learn from our mistakes, and be willing to start over, even destroy the progress we think we were making. Maybe that is what Liberation Theologians are attempting to do within the Church. Realizing the harm they have done, and working to start over.

[24] A remarkable insight, I believe, that goes to the core of liberation theology and, I would argue, should go to the core of the practice of teaching liberation theology. Teaching liberation theology requires of us that we adopt what Zen Buddhist's call, "Beginner's Mind." If we could remember that the academy creates its own iron walls just as clearly as those that separate the citizens of Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora. If only we could remember that, however radical the *content* of our courses, *as components of a system* they simultaneously reinforce the social functions of the institution of higher education. How do we begin to blur the borders that higher education systematically creates? The act of teaching is not disengaged from the site of teaching. For many of the reasons that my students have suggested and that I have discussed, the academy is rarely a site of liberation. Realizing the harm we have done, we need, repeatedly, to start over.

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