

Assignment: Visual Display “Women Unite for Human Rights”

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Description

In this class project, students worked in groups to create a visual display that demonstrated the variety of ways women and men are working for human rights and social justice. Each group researched a women’s organization in Latin America or a Latina organization in the United States and presented the research on panels in a public display in Atrium I of the university. Overall the project demonstrated the myriad political activities of Latinas throughout the Americas.

Each group was required to include the following information about the organization in their display: (a) a description and history of the organization, (b) goals and activities of the organization, (c) geographic location, (d) the context in which the organization works, including important historic events influencing the group, (e) a list of sources (including at least two scholarly sources), and additional information on the organization. This material was to be written by the students, with proper citations for any direct quotes. The narratives ranged from three to six pages. Students were asked to include some type of illustration for the project such as photos, maps, a logo, or other illustration.

Rationale

The project was designed to meet a number of learning goals on at least four different levels. First, students gained specific information on the course content for the

classes on Human Rights and Latina & Latin American Feminisms. (The project was carried out by students in two different courses.) Through completion of the project, students gained information on the ways that women have worked to defend their rights as well the political and economic context in which they did so. Second, the project helped students practice research, reading, and writing skills essential to university learning. Students had to identify and evaluate a variety of scholarly and non-scholarly sources on the topic. The public nature of the display was an extra incentive for students to carefully edit their written work, to work in groups to edit their work, and to send one or more drafts to me to read as well. Third, the project promoted skills of teamwork and creating a visual project, both skills required in diverse work settings. The visual nature of the project also allowed students to apply their own talents, interests, and creativity in presenting their work. Fourth, the project served to educate a wider audience, the university community, about struggles for human rights. The final display challenged a common stereotype of women, especially of Latinas and Latin American women, as passive, apolitical, and trapped in the home. The panels demonstrated the myriad ways women are active in defending their rights and taking leadership roles in their communities to do so.

Originality

The assignment was created by the course instructor to fit the specific course learning objectives. Years ago, I had created a similar project in collaboration with a colleague teaching a Women's Studies course.

Effectiveness

The assignment met the planned learning goals along with serving additional goals. The results of the project demonstrate the effectiveness of the methods. In completing the project, several students commented that they were inspired by the organizations themselves. After reading about women's work to defend their human rights under very difficult conditions, some students considered what they themselves could do to promote social change. Other students commented that they had learned a great deal about experiences of discrimination and exploitation as well as about the tremendous struggles and risks taken by women in Latin America and the United States to defend their rights. Some commented that this was the first time they had created any sort of visual display and that they very much enjoyed the project. Perhaps most important, students were proud of the work they had produced and actively shared what they had learned with others.

Student creativity in the project as well as their ability to engage others from outside our class in the learning was beyond my own expectations. For example, inspired by reading about the undervalued domestic workers and janitors in the groups *Mujeres Unidas y Activas* and SEIU's Janitor for Justice Campaign, one student created a project within the project to honor the custodial workers here at UHCL. She invited female custodians from UHCL to create a box to introduce themselves and took photographs of the women as well. The women decorated the exterior of the box and filled it with photos

and mementos of their lives. The idea behind the boxes was to give a name, face, and life to workers who are unappreciated and whose work is often undervalued. The custodians asked if we will do the project again next year. Another student in writing about the domestic workers of *Mujeres Unidas y Activas* reflected on her own experience as a domestic worker and related it to that of the organization.

Transferability

This assignment easily could be adapted to many different types of courses ranging from Anthropology, to History, Sociology, Women's Studies, Education, and Psychology, among others. Students could research organizations, social movements, or nongovernmental organizations, among others. In each case the project could demonstrate how members of oppressed groups are actively working to change their own situation. That is, the project would move beyond viewing people as merely victims, but would allow students to see them as actors. For example, in a Women's Studies course students could research women's organizations generally or specific types of groups such as those working to end violence against women, depending of course on the focus of the class. In Education courses, students could examine organizations, nationally or globally, in which parents are working to improve their children's schools and education. In courses on a geographic region such as Latin America or Asia (in History or Anthropology) students could research social movements or nongovernmental organizations, perhaps around a specific theme such as human rights, ecology, and poverty, among others. In courses related to diversity in the United States, students could research organizations and social movements in which oppressed groups work for

equality. Although in this case the projects were displayed publically on campus, the projects could be displayed within the classroom, on a public website, or in another manner.

Additional Materials

- (a) Sample of references provided to student to assist in their research
- (b) Sample of student narratives on the organizations
- (c) Photos from the exhibit

(a) Sample of the references provided by instructor to assist students in their research

Chile – Arpillera Movement

Agosín, Marjorie. 1996. *Tapestries of hope, threads of love the arpillera movement in Chile, 1974-1994*. Albuquerque, N.M. : University of New Mexico Press.

Moya-Raggio. 1984. “Arpilleras: Chilean Culture of Resistance.” Feminist Studies 10(4): 277-290.

Adams, Jacqueline. 2002. “Art in Social Movements: Shantytown Women’s Protest in Pinochet’s Chile.” Sociological Forum 17(1).

FILM “In Women’s Hands: The Changing Roles of Women”

(b) Sample of student writings on the organizations (a few selected paragraphs of the longer narrative)

The Arpilleras of Chile

Historical Context

On September 11, 1973, Chile’s long history of democracy came to an abrupt and tragic end with the death of President Salvador Allende and the forceful deposing of his

government by a military junta, led by General Augusto Pinochet. Proclaiming that Chile was in a dire socioeconomic crisis, Pinochet's authoritarian military government suspended civil rights, judicial due process, and sought to permanently reverse the redistributive policies implemented by the Marxist Allende through "neo-liberal" economic reforms (Silva, 2002). While these free-market policies ushered in a period of dramatic economic expansion, they also increased wealth disparities in Chilean society, as those at the lowest rungs of the economic ladder were increasingly marginalized by long bouts of unemployment (Adams, 2002). As a result, many families found themselves having to fight off starvation, as well as endure the horrors of the Chilean state's civil/political oppression. . . . [this section continues]

The Power of the Arpillera

Named for the humble materials used in their creation, the arpillera (or "burlap") is a handmade quilt, a traditional art form, with which the arpilleristas make the transition from passive observers of the horrors of their world, to become an active force for change (Agosin, 1996). The arpilleristas stitch together scraps of fabric that are often combined with photos to create three dimensional scenes depicting the "disappeared," political prisoners, poverty, inequality, and unemployment (Moya-Raggio, 1984). Many arpilleras look beyond illustrating the suffering around them, to often identify the source of their suffering and emphasize the necessity of solidarity and peace to bring about change. As such, the arpilleras themselves became a symbol for resistance and solidarity for many Chileans (Adams, 2002). Through their involvement in the movement, arpilleristas moved beyond the gender norms dictated by Chilean society by renouncing their

bystander status to become not only activists, but breadwinners (Moya-Raggio, 1984).

[narrative continues]

La Mujer Obrera

La Mujer Obrera (LMO), The Woman Worker, is an El Paso, Texas based organization providing employment opportunities, job training, various social services and education for Latina women within a lower socioeconomic status in the area. The group formed in 1982 in response to the relocation of garment factories from the United States to other countries, particularly Mexico, seeking cheaper labor sources. (Leyva, p. 1) Garment factory closings displaced many workers, primarily Latina women, who were then ill-equipped to secure other viable employment. Basic struggles in the early history of LMO were directed against the racism, sexism and rampant poverty prevalent among Mexican American women (Marquez, p. 70).

Through the years LMO has grown exponentially, encompassing various business entities, including Rayito de Sol (daycare center), Café Mayapan (restaurant), Disenos Mayapan (an apparel manufacturer), Mercado Mayapan (a market), Lum Metik Trading Company (a subsidiary of Centro Mayapan) and Uxmal Apartments. (PCG, p. 2) LMO strives to assist and empower the Mexican American community in El Paso and continues to grow; giving Latinas the education and support needed to arm themselves against the cycle of poverty. [narrative continues]

(c) Photos from the campus display

Women Unite for Human Rights



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