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From the Bottom-Up: Grassroots Approach to Border Studies in the Classroom

By

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Short Title: Grassroots Approach to Border Studies

Abstract: This case study explores different classroom methodologies for graduate and undergraduate seminars that aid in the construction of historical and contemporary understandings of borders, specifically the borders between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada. These grassroots constructions of the border entail historical connections and disconnections with “being” local, national, and transnational.

Keywords: Border Studies, Grassroots approach, classroom, methodologies

During the last quarter of the twentieth century undergraduate and graduate programs in arts and humanities began to include the border as an object of study in the United States. Typically the emphasis was on the U.S.-Mexican border, and the lack of clarity in defining the “border residents” often affected the multiple and fragmented understandings and interpretations of the border as

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conceptual tool.\(^1\) To remedy this complication, historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and Chicano scholars threaded multivocal portraits of the sociocultural, political, economic, demographic, and geographical factors affecting the southern border of the U.S.\(^2\) This article explores how experiential learning, lecturing, and group discussion in graduate and undergraduate seminars aid in constructing and deconstructing the historical and contemporary understandings and interpretations of the U.S., Mexican, and Canadian borders. By drawing from people’s experiences, my study gives saliency to the construction of grassroots border epistemologies.\(^3\)

The American West frontier has been studied in multiple and fragmented ways. Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893 gave closure to the expanding American Frontier in a paper delivered at the American Historical Association where images of “taming” wilderness through civilization and democracy were consistent with his depiction of the West.\(^4\) However, more than giving closure, the frontier thesis meant expansion, settlement, opportunity, dispossession, and tension.\(^5\)

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historians influenced by Turnerian parameters limited their focus of study and neglected to look at minorities and their socioeconomic contributions such as the “logging frontier, the fishing frontier, the tourism-promoting frontier, …the farming frontier... and the sexual services frontier.”

Here the concept of border or la frontera is neither related to this closure or limitation in studying the vast frontier nor to the construction of national borderland histories between Mexico, the United States, and Canada. The nation-based inquiry model, framed by Bolton in 1921, constrained the “Spanish colonial project” as the area of study for national border histories even beyond the British Empire and eastern North America. To a greater extent, the Boltonian borderland studies constrained the area of study to the Spanish project and failed to include Chicanos and Indigenous people, as well as the residents of the Canadian border.

In contrast, I use the term “border” to refer to a more encompassing and fluid transnational framework for studying the U.S., Mexican, and Canadian border. As such the border is the lived experience of political and social contentions from below and not from “above” (e.g., State driven projects). From an anthropological approach, the concept of transnationalism has been defined as the processes experienced by immigrants who “forge and sustain multi-stranded relations that link together


See for a similar proposal Johnson and Graybill, Bridging National Borders in Northern America; see also Samuel Truett and Elliott Young, eds., Continental Crossroads Remapping U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004). See also Anzaldúa, Borderlands La Frontera; Bellfy, Three Fires Unity; Sheila McManus, The Line Which Separates: Race, Gender, and the Making of the Alberta-Montana Borderlands (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2005); Neal McLeod, “Plains Cree Identity: Borderlands, Ambiguous Genealogies and Narrative irony,”
their societies of origin and settlement.” Immigrants share dislocating and interconnecting experiences between their homeland and their countries of settlement; these grassroots stories of transmigrants are constructed in a much more fluid, contentious, blurred, and transnational manner. Drawing from Caribbean immigrant experiences, Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc examined the connections that transmigrants have with their home countries (Granada and St. Vincent) and their new settlement in New York. Therefore, being transnational means sustaining social, economic, political, and cultural relations that are practiced beyond the political borders of the nation-states.

The classroom setting in postsecondary education represents the scenario par excellence for studying borders in a more encompassing manner. The material included in this study draws from my teaching experiences in undergraduate and graduate seminars in anthropology and general arts in universities located in Canada, Mexico, and the United States. The border thematic has been addressed, but not limited, towards understanding diversity, conflict, identity, as well as social and political constraints. My personal experiences while crossing borders between Mexico, the United States, and Canada have also enriched the discussions and sparked my interest in writing about and sharing the tools that might be effective in teaching this subject. I briefly describe each of the teaching methods used in the learning process, which include experiential learning, lecturing, and group discussion and the rationale for selecting these methods in the classroom setting. In the rest of the

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12 I did not use the term “contact zone” because it constraints social interaction or “contact” to an enclosed area; see for details Mary Louise Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (London: Routledge, 1992).
13 In the United States (2011) at Emerson College it was an undergraduate course in the arts and humanities program (the Myth of the American Frontier), in Canada at St. Francis Xavier University (2009) also an undergraduate course in the general arts program (Introduction to Cultural Anthropology), and in Mexico (2012) at the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla in a graduate program of Social Sciences and Humanities in Language Sciences (Power and Social Control).
article, I demonstrate how the combination of these teaching methods aids in the construction and deconstruction of the border from the ground up. In other words, students recount their stories based on their personal experience or by drawing from other people’s experiences such as their families’, friends’, and significant others’. At the end, I attempt to demonstrate that grassroots understandings of people’s connection and disconnection with the border create the histories of “being” local, national, and transnational.

Teachers and students “have relationships with histories which shape the fluid process of classroom interaction” 14 and this fluidity is only feasible when dialogues are present in the educational process. 15 Paul Freire accurately noted that “dialogical education” is the “practice of freedom” where the program content is not elaborated from the educators’ knowledge and worldviews. 16 Rather, both students and educators actively engage in deconstructing their worldviews in an on-going manner. 17 Following this pedagogical principle, I design my course content with the combination of at least three teaching methods (experiential learning, lecturing, and group discussion) for addressing issues related to Indigenous-State relations, violence, social power and control, and the border. Earlier research has documented the benefits of combining more than one teaching method in post-secondary education and this study echoes this finding. 18

16 Freire, Pedagogy, 96.
17 Freire, Pedagogy. 109. Here it is important to note that Freire refers to “thought-language” as the object of investigation of dialogical education “with which men and women refer to reality, the levels at which they perceive that reality, and their view of the world in which their generative themes are found”; see for details Freire, Pedagogy, 97.
In 1998, Gardiner conducted a literature review on the quality of education and effective learning experiences in higher education across the United States. His review noted the need for changing the traditional teaching method of giving lectures and to embrace methodologies with lasting learning outcomes. Over the past two decades professors of social work have been practicing experiential learning with very positive results. This method stresses the process of acquiring skills and knowledge through lived experience. Students actively involve the acquisition and retention of knowledge in the development of critical thinking skills and to favor peer and teacher interaction.

For instance, Wehbi successfully applied experiential learning in the courses she taught at the bachelors, masters, and doctoral levels in social work. She argues that the practice of social work has been affected by experiential learning in three areas: first, learning experience that extends beyond the course limitations; second, shaping the attitudes and skills aid the practice; and third, giving students the opportunity to experience certain events challenge the practice. Her findings emphasize the classroom as a learning experience where diverse ways of being and acting are enacted. Therefore, the praxis of experiential learning is quite useful for deploying and acquiring knowledge among and across students.

In contrast, the lecturing method is only centered on the instructor’s expertise. It usually entails lecturing and reading notes. In addition, the lecturer is in control of what is being said and presented in front of the classroom. The professor might explain or dictate the content of the course material to

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students. This method provides a large amount of student material in a very short period of time, which represents an advantage when professors face a tight schedule. Nonetheless, an increasing number of studies noted that this method is less effective if used as the primary learning tool for knowledge retention, modeling, and skill development. In addition, other studies documented cases where lecturers left the academy due to the stress and alienation experienced in the classroom setting and at large (e.g., university). Despite these limitations, however, this teaching method has positive learning outcomes when used in combination with other methods. Two studies are worth noting. The first one illustrates how Dr. Cano added multiple types of weekly assessments to her traditional teaching method, lecturing and laboratory, in her Distributed Information Systems course at the Technical University of Cartagena, Spain. Some results included higher student participation, improvement in students’ grades and performance. The second one conveys the idea of including action-research (e.g., drama and performance) in the classic Greek drama course at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. Professor Zeeman found an increasing level of student empowerment and motivation. These examples give an idea of lecturing’s success while combined with other methods.

Finally, the group discussion method encourages the students to participate at large while answering a few questions or expressing a few thoughts or examples related to class material. The advantage of this method is the students’ involvement in the learning process and the encouragement to


explore and question their worldviews. In principle, a dialogue is present and both the students and the professor engage in constructing and deconstructing their worldviews in a dialogical and respectful manner. The discussion method has been very useful in addressing cross-cultural differences and teaching diversity in the classroom. At the same time, this method should be used in combination with other teaching methods such as lecturing, experiential learning, role-play, and group work. The use of experiential learning, lecturing, and group discussion aid in understanding the multiple and fragmented constructions of the borders. The border is a social process and the knowledge drawn from case studies provide the source of information for future practice.

To return to my case study, the stories elaborated here represent a blend of both students’ experiences and ideas about the Canadian, U.S., and Mexican borders. Consequently, in my undergraduate and graduate seminars I encourage dialogue between and among students. I also interject my personal experiences and views on issues that are at stake or need further refinement and critique. For instance, my experiences while crossing the U.S., Mexican, and Canadian borders have been quite different at each locale. The Canadian border is less demanding, a short stop at the border patrol checkpoint and fewer questions to answer (e.g., my residence and days of stay). The Mexican border seems a welcoming and non-questionable locale for citizens, residents, and visitors; while the U.S. border is quite demanding given the amount of security concerns and my Mexican citizenship.

Indeed, mapping borders entail a dialogue between students and professors and the use of the aforementioned methods facilitate this dialogical approach. I use these methods in the same relative order as outlined above and my classes usually include minority students. During the experiential

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learning session (approximately 2 hours) students recount their personal experiences or ideas about border crossing in petit comité for about an hour (a student will write a summary of the stories told by the group). The second portion of the session is left for the group to convey their stories at large and the professor facilitates the flow of information among and between the group of students who point to the major ideas, views, and discussions embraced by each comité. The professor also interjects her own experiences while crossing the border and draws the discussion to a more dialectical construction and deconstruction of the border from a grassroots approach. Some stories emphasized the militarization of the U.S.- Mexican border where the “thick wall with barbed wire” (see Figure 1) fragmented both sides of the border. To contrast, the Canadian-U.S. border was seen as an “open space” or “a continuum” where the border checkpoint was barely guarded by immigration officers (e.g., I.C.E. in the U.S., that is, Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials) and “the scenery was visible from afar” pero vemos el campo a distancia (see Figure 2).

Other students stated: “Yo me sorprendí del alambrado con púas [referring to the US-Mexican border in Tijuana]... parecía como si estuviese pasando por el corredor de una cárcel” [I was surprised by the barbed wire ... it seemed like a prison corridor]. “Mi Tío ya me lo había dicho: ‘no importa que seas Chicana, la espera es larga y con muchas preguntas de regreso a casa [US]’; pero lo más impactante fue cruzar caminando a Tijuana por San Isidro, nada de preguntas, nadie te checa nada, entras libremente [to Mexico] y sin papeles” [My uncle mentioned to me: ‘no matter whether you are Chicana, the waiting is long and with many questions to go home’ [the U.S.]; but more shocking was to cross from San Isidro to Tijuana, no questions, no checks, no nothing, you enter freely [to Mexico] and without papers]. “The Vermont-Quebec border looked like an empty space with no cars, no people, perhaps the cold winter was making its presence. I crossed very quick and felt no
difference between the U.S. and Canada, except for the encounter with the border patrol, the signs in French, and the kilometers…. they reminded me that I was in Canada.”

Some conveyed ideas about the freedom they experienced at both ends, either enjoying the “shopping, eating, and relaxing,” or “drinking and partying” which is not always feasible in their home country. 29 The border-states of Mexico and the U.S. represent an important hub for U.S. drinkers. Teenagers cross the border for alcohol consumption and sex tourism. For instance, Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, and El Paso are the locales par excellence for underage binge drinking. Students’ expressed similar stories for the Canadian-U.S. border where teenagers also cross to Canada for partying and drinking. However, buying alcohol in Canada and Mexico is more expensive than in the U.S.

Shopping is another recurrent activity mentioned by students. It not only entails the economic exchange of legal merchandise from Mexico, Canada, and the U.S., but the illegal commerce (smuggling from illegal drugs to merchandise, alcohol, firearms, and human traffic). The reasonable pricing of items (low tax) in the U.S. represents a premium site for many shoppers. As one student puts it, “we purchase our groceries, gas, shoes, and clothes in San Diego. It’s much cheaper and there’s more variety… I like buying hamburgers, chicken, eggs, meat, French fries, chicken fingers, and chicken wings … alitas… Tijuana is very expensive.”

Students also articulated their family ties across the border. This represents another variable for relating to the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. The reality is that some family members might live, work, and shop in a different country. People across the border deal with the political entities and thus, the legal documentation required for border crossing. Consequently, many students crossed and continue to

29 The legal drinking age for alcohol consumption and purchase in Mexico, Canada, and the United States is quite different. In the United States the legal age is 21 and in Mexico 18 years of age. In Ontario, Saskatchewan, British Columbia, Newfoundland, Labrador, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Northwest Territories, Yukon, and Nunavut the drinking age is 19. Only Manitoba, Quebec, and Alberta the legal age is 18.
cross the border for family gatherings, visits, tourism, and so forth. The border is experienced as the place for local and global meeting where the feeling of being a stranger melts as the unfamiliar becomes familiar, and the national meets the transnational.

The lecturing method introduces the scholarly perspective to students. The border as a conceptual tool is elaborated in three consecutive sessions where reading journal articles and relevant published books enrich the historical and theoretical (de)construction of the frontier, borderland, and border. Most undergraduate seminars in North America allot three hours per session while graduate seminars usually last for about four hours (particularly in Mexico). The lecturing time will last for about an hour and a half for undergraduate programs and two hours for graduate programs. The emphasis is placed on the ongoing constructions and deconstructions of the terminology employed for studying political borders between and among nation-to-nation and nation-states constructs. Students receive a set of readings in advance and they are expected to participate at the end of each session by answering a few questions posed by the professor. For example, what are some of the differences between the concept of the borderland and the frontier in the United States? Why is the concept of “La Frontera,” as elaborated by Anzaldúa, useful? Do you think it is possible to construct grassroots border epistemologies for the U.S., Mexican, and Canadian borders? How do the cultural constructions of “the border” affect our understanding of it? Why do political borders exist? Are they necessary? To a certain extent these questions address the difficulty of studying the border as a “homogeneous” theoretical construct and the emphasis is placed on fluidity, mobility and praxis.

Following the lecturing, the group discussion session represents an open forum for summarizing their grassroots constructions of the border. This session usually lasts for about an hour and students are given about five to ten minutes to discuss with their classmates about their understandings of the border.

30 My experience in graduate seminars is at the Autonomous University of Puebla’s Institute of Social Sciences and
borders. They intertwine their grassroots knowledge with the theory session explored in class. Students usually recall their experiences while crossing the border and/or the ideas they had about it, including those of their family members, friends, or other acquaintances who might have the experience of crossing borders. They make a few interpretations of the material discussed and their thoughts are stated in petit comité. The forum is then opened for general contributions made by the students and the professor. Here the learning process is enriched by the ideas that have been contested or re-elaborated about the borders in petit comité. The process of creating grassroots epistemologies is enriched through dialogue and serious engagement with the assignments, readings, discussion, and lecturing material. Finally, some students expressed their biases on the schema for drawing the borderline between Mexico, the U.S., and Canada. In other words, they deconstructed their knowledge from the ground up. A few examples on mobility, displacement, and being local as well as global were also articulated. All of the above gave force to the argument that borders are fluid and lived experiences that unite, divide, and craft populations. Experiential learning, lecturing, and class discussion are, indeed, an effective tool for thinking and talking about the Canadian-U.S. and the Mexican-U.S. borders in a very creative and contentious manner.

The image of students as passive learners is, hopefully, vanishing. Professors in the area of border studies are embracing the challenge and moving forward in creating critical thinkers and creative learning environments. Many students expressed that theorizing about the border means multiplicity, fluidity, and mobility. The use of experiential learning, lecturing and group discussion proved to be very useful in igniting new insights and knowledge about the borders. Grassroots epistemologies are built from both empirical data and theory, and to a certain extent, this process

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explains the deconstruction and construction of concepts such as the border. One area in need of further refinement might include the exploration of other methodologies that will aid in expanding our knowledge and understandings of what borders mean and their usage, as well as teaching in other countries that are not related to North America. Future research might also study the mechanisms that connect and disconnect people across the borders both, as imagined and embodied constructs.

Figure 1: Tijuana La Frontera Mexicana con Estados Unidos de América (Tijuana the Mexican and the United States Border)

Photo: Manzano-Munguía, November 2012

Figure 2: Sault St. Marie the U.S. and Canadian Border

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