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Forming Oral History Researchers: Diversifying and Innovating Honors Experiential Learning across Campus

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Abstract: This article presents a transdisciplinary, cross-campus collaboration among honors and non-honors students in the field of humanities. Trained in oral history methodologies and integrated as IRB-certified researchers into an ongoing (2018–present) project, a cohort of students ($n = 34$) participate in place-based, community-engaged learning and research involving Hispanic New Mexicans, known as *Nuevomexicanas/os*. Drawing on the tenets of experiential learning as a mode of honors discourse, the authors describe how this challenging ethnographic project serves to bring a diverse group of learners together while deepening interpersonal, intercultural, and interdisciplinary connections. Results indicate that students benefit from working with more diverse populations and gain insights, expertise, and experiences they demonstrably use outside of class. Acknowledging that this project is not a panacea for ongoing issues in diversifying or innovating honors experience, the authors posit this innovative curriculum as a means for creating connections and fostering student appreciation for each other, the diverse communities in which they live, and the importance of giving back.

Keywords: diversity in education; experiential learning; oral history methodology; Hispanic-serving institutions (HSI); University of New Mexico (NM)—Honors College

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OVERLAPPING INTERSECTIONS: HONORS INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND HUMANITIES RESEARCH TEACHING

In early spring 2018, two faculty members sat outside the Student Union Building at the University of New Mexico (UNM), conceptualizing a project that would become a three-phase, multiyear, interdisciplinary oral history project that continues to evolve in 2020. Nogar, a graduate of what was then called the UNM Honors Program and who is an associate professor in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at UNM, and Gómez, a tenure-track faculty member in the UNM Honors College, were eager to research the baby boomer generation of Hispanic New Mexicans. Over the months that followed, we secured funding for our oral history project, adding a pedagogical component involving two coordinated, collaborative courses that would include undergraduates in the research phase of the project. Although Richard Badenhausen's 2019 *JNCHC* article "Shunning Complaint: A Call for Solutions from the Honors Community" had not yet been published, we were already considering several of the same questions he poses in the essay as we designed and implemented a humanities research project with a robust interdisciplinary and experiential learning core. In fall 2018, we taught our conjoined classes of thirty-four total students, welcoming all thirty-four undergraduate students (and one graduate student) onto our research team.

This article outlines the project in which the students participated as IRB-certified researchers; provides background and rationale for the use of an oral history methodology for this type of project; explains the course in relationship to honors concepts of experiential learning; outlines our unique pedagogical approach to our honors plus non-honors collaboratively taught course; offers some takeaway reflections on the process; and proposes future horizons for this interdisciplinary collaboration. By no means is our joint class a solution to any of the problems that we identified at our institution or within our respective departments/colleges in regard to diversity. However, we noted an increased interest and involvement with the honors college among students in Spanish and Portuguese along with a greater community and linguistic awareness among the honors college students. An undergraduate student participant recently listed this course and its project on her resumé for her graduate school application as an example of research capability; we realized in that moment that we had broken new ground in the realm of honors education.

THE PROJECT: RESEARCHING NUEVOMEXICANO BABY BOOMERS

The research project, titled “Voces de Nuevo México: Documenting the Cultural Contributions of the Baby Boomer Generation,” emerged from a desire to hear and record how a population of Hispanic New Mexicans known as *Nuevomexicanas/os* articulate their subject position. The project focuses on a generation of Nuevomexicanos who, after enduring many different types of discrimination (linguistic, racial, educational), have not had their history acknowledged and recorded in any significant fashion. Although nationwide research on the baby boomer generation is well established and increasingly well developed, sources on Nuevomexicano boomers are few and far between. We consulted Loeffler and Davidson’s edition *Voices of Counterculture in the Southwest* as a reference for us and for our students but found the scarcity of documentation and research on the topic stunning and motivating for our own work. As researchers who focus on Latinx literature and culture with specific interest in New Mexico, we found the dearth of work on this area egregious.

The baby boomer generation in New Mexico is one that fully experienced unprecedented change in comparison to previous generations of New Mexicans. In contrast to their parents, many of whom were raised in Spanish-dominant households, this generation felt the full brunt of English-language immersion in public schools set against a changing sociolinguistic matrix at home and in their communities. They were the first generation to see the rapid conversion of a rural, primarily agricultural economy to an urban, nuclear one. They grew up in the midst of that local shift as well as cultural shifts on a national level, which manifested in unique ways in New Mexico. As a result of these changes, the experiences of members of this generation have sometimes been seen as (or perceived of from within) as more hybrid, less traditional, and, ultimately, less valuable. However, it is precisely this unique third space that we saw as rare and irreplaceable, both motivating the creation of the research project and necessitating student involvement.

Our project was guided by a concept central to oral history research as articulated by oral historian Donald Ritchie: “That is the reason for doing oral history: to ask the questions that have not been asked and to collect the reminiscences that otherwise would be lost” (34). By prioritizing accounts of Nuevomexicana/o baby boomers, we saw this project as a means to create a sense of value for narrators and narratives in their lived experiences. Rather

than compiling a selection of unrelated personal narratives, this project strives to reveal connections and divergences across the various experiences of this bifurcated generation and to place them in conversation.

In a parallel sense, we also saw the opportunity to create value for the students who would partake in this unique humanities research experience. Ritchie attests that oral history is understood as “‘doubly radical, doubly democratic,’ in that it recover[s] the voices of ordinary people seen as left behind or forgotten by the forces of progress and in that it began outside the universities, pioneered by non-professional historians” (6). From the fields of ethnography and oral history, we know that too often the most interesting and important stories lie before us but are not given the attention they merit because they become, as ethnographer Clifford Geertz has noted, invisible to us as we live among them.

ORAL HISTORY: METHODS, APPLICATIONS, AND STUDENT PRACTICE

An oral history approach was always integral to our project; the dearth of print literature urged on our desire to implement the most up-to-date methodology when collecting the video interviews that would constitute the project’s primary documentation. To learn best oral history practices, we attended the Voces Oral History Seminar hosted at the University of Texas at Austin. Gómez, Nogar and graduate assistant Julianna Wiggins participated in the one-week session led by oral history experts Maggie Rivas-Rodríguez (UT Austin) and Todd Moyer (University of North Texas), who was then the sitting president of the Oral History Association. Both Rivas-Rodríguez and Moyer worked extensively on oral history endeavors that combined research with teaching and have played fundamental roles in institutionalizing the field of oral history in universities across the United States, Rivas-Rodríguez through her work on Latinx veterans in Texas and Moyer for his research on African American communities and populations, including the Tuskegee Airmen. From the seminar we learned about interview practice, archival expectations, and, most importantly, the concept of “shared authority” set forth by Michael Frisch, which poses that oral historians and the individuals they interview (narrators) share the authoritative voice guiding the creation of oral histories.

Upon returning to New Mexico at the close of the seminar, we conducted fourteen interviews of Nuevomexicano baby boomers, our narrators. We ran the interviews with our graduate assistant, an honors college graduate and

MA candidate in Spanish and Portuguese, and two UNM Honors College students; the undergraduates were funded as part of the UNM Honors College Research Institute, which is designed to advance undergraduate research. The honors students confirmed the viability of engaging undergraduate students in a large-scale oral history project. These initial interviews, and their enthusiastic narrators, confirmed the participants' desire to share their stories with our research team. Through this process, we were able to reflect with the students, who identified as white, on what it was like for them to interact with Hispanic narrators whose first language was often Spanish. We also questioned students about their experience speaking intergenerationally and across cultures: what was challenging/unexpected/fruitful? From these conversations, we gleaned that this humanities research process created a unique learning opportunity in which students could experience a culture different from their own in a meaningful and reciprocal way. We then reflected carefully on course development, looking to honors practice for guidance in creating this new model.

INNOVATING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: PLACE-BASED, COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING AND RESEARCH

As we designed our course convergence, we considered the various National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) approaches to experiential learning as a mode of honors learning, leading us to three main tenets:

- Curricula emphasize exploration and/or discovery rather than acquisition of specific knowledge sets; a focus on hands-on, usually supervised, practical engagement with usable outcomes can also occur.
- Programs focus on student-driven learning projects facilitated by faculty who provide no necessary, single conclusion to be drawn by all or many students. Programs often include international experience and active learning.
- The process often involves continuous reflective writing and oral presentation as the students articulate their discoveries and document their personal growth; this process may apply to all other modes described here. (“Definition of Honors Education”)

Using these guidelines, we provided students with structure that allowed them to explore and engage in practical processes that would yield results usable for the project. Through some key steps in the research protocol that students carried out on their own and which we outline below, they were compelled to continuously reflect on and discuss their findings and process.

Returning to Badenhausen's "Shunning Complaint," we further noted that honors educators have been leaders in experiential and place-based learning, interdisciplinary education, and civic engagement (5). We knew that this course would engage all three methods of teaching. However, we wanted to do something more than just place-based learning. We wanted the learning to connect with community in a deep sense; we did not want a superficial experience. When inviting students to participate in this project, we intended to place honors students in unfamiliar communities to whom they would, in return, contribute a consultable archive of histories and, we hoped, increase awareness and valorization of individual narratives.

Our conjoined classes were also oriented to draw honors students into more ethnically diverse settings. Although the University of New Mexico is an Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), this mission is not represented in the numbers within our honors college. Fifty percent of students enrolled in the honors college in 2017 identified as white, and 30% identified as Hispanic. The overall UNM undergraduate population, in comparison, had 32.49% white students and 48.56% Hispanic students in fall 2017. This reversal of numbers demonstrated that as the honors program at the flagship public university in the state of New Mexico, the honors college still had work to do in order to adequately serve Hispanic students. In contrast, the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at UNM is one of the most diverse units on campus, from its faculty to its students.

Noting this disparity, we saw a further shading in the essay titled "Got Privilege: An Honors Capstone Activity on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" by Patrick Bahls and Reid Chapman: namely, the idea that "[W]hite students' limited interaction with members of nonwhite communities may hinder their ability to engage authentically with racial and ethnic diversity and to understand the perspectives of their nonwhite counterparts" (91). Seemingly confirming this observation, a cursory preliminary review of the students enrolled in the honors section indicated that most were unlikely to interface with Hispanic communities inside or outside of the classroom. We also gained a sense of the need to create convergence: in the NCHC monograph *Shatter the Glassy Stare: Implementing Experiential Learning in Higher*

Education, some of the essays address the importance of bridging the socio-economic and sociocultural gaps that exist between the university and its surrounding community, the so called “town and gown” dynamic (see especially Anita R. Guynn’s “Place as Text: Town and Gown”). We were cognizant throughout the course of the ways that predominantly white honors students would authentically engage with more ethnically diverse communities and were attentive to what this could mean for honors students, for Spanish and Portuguese students, and for our volunteer narrators.

CONJOINED CLASSES FOR ONE PROJECT: INTERDISCIPLINARY EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Transitioning our research from the summer field experience, during which we gained a sense for how undergraduate students might respond to the challenges of oral history research, to the fall semester presented one major challenge: we needed to find a way to teach our courses collaboratively. We accomplished this goal by teaching two separate courses, each of which was housed in its own department/college. The courses shared the same oral history project, but each course was taught with autonomy and in accordance with the expectations of its department/college. The honors section, “History and Culture of Northern New Mexico,” and the Spanish and Portuguese section, “Voces de Nuevo México,” both focused on oral history and on New Mexico history and culture. The courses met together once a week and separately once a week to address their respective disciplinary requirements. The student level varied: the Spanish course was offered as 301/439 and therefore had freshmen to seniors enrolled; the honors course students ranged from sophomores to seniors.

Part of our teaching innovation relied on how we paired students to conduct their research. Students from Spanish and Portuguese were matched with students from honors to have heterogeneous research pairs who conducted interviews in the field; the complementarity, especially in bilingual/Spanish language skill, was helpful. After the UNM Institutional Review Board (IRB) office visited the class, we organized a “pizza party” for completion of the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) training and Conflict of Interest (COI) certification, requirements for any researcher participating in an IRB-approved project involving human subjects. While highly uncommon in humanities research, IRB approval is required for many types of science and social sciences research, and at the time our institution

required such approval for an oral history project. The thirty-four students across the two classes completed the requirements and became official IRB-approved researchers on the project.

The combined classes benefited from facilities and equipment provided by the UNM Language Learning Center (LLC); we used the LLC space to accommodate the large, combined class in collaborative fashion. To record their interviews, student research pairs checked out the LLC's iPod Touches, used in conjunction with tripods and double lavalier microphones we purchased with grant funds. With seventeen student pairs, the LLC's support was of immense help as we were able to forego the anticipated purchase of new recording devices.

For both classes, students completed readings on oral history theory and methodology to orient them to core concepts of the field. Then, each class separately read works supporting the cultural context of the narrators they would interview and completed supplementary work: the honors class traveled on field visits to specific New Mexican sites, and the Spanish/Portuguese class worked on the Spanish-language aspects of Nuevomexicano literature and expression.

In addition to preparatory readings and reflection on New Mexico and oral history practice, students had to prepare themselves as researchers. To this end, we created a research protocol packet to guide them through the interview process, both as interviewers themselves and then as support individuals for their partner's interviews. Students were independently responsible for recruiting narrators, scheduling interviews, coordinating with their partner to be present at interviews, and conducting interviews. To prepare for their field work, students practiced the interview protocol by interviewing each other and then reviewing their work. We also critiqued practice interviews as a combined class to work on technique and think about the roles of interviewer and narrator.

In the field, each student conducted two interviews. The first interview was what we termed a "life history" interview, which ranged in length from half an hour to several hours: one student even took a lunch break with her narrator in the middle of the interview so they could refresh their (literal and figurative) batteries. After the life history interview, students took a deep dive into primary and secondary sources related to topics their narrators privileged during the life history interview. Using the archives at the Center for Southwest Research at the UNM Libraries, they formulated questions for the second interview based on their research. The second, topic-specific interview

drew on narrators' recollections of these key topics. The topic-specific interview tended to be shorter than the life history interview, more in the range of thirty minutes to an hour. Rather than transcribing their two interviews, students created key terms that derived from the interview topics and that will be used for future archival indexing of these interviews. Finally, students wrote mini-histories (biographical texts) of their narrators. To model these scholarly practices, we directed students to the Rocky Mountain Online Archive (RMOA) to derive relevant key search terms and to Rivas-Rodríguez's Voces Oral History website to write effective short biographies.

In December 2018, in collaboration with the National Hispanic Cultural Center (NHCC) and the UNM Southwest Hispanic Research Institute (SHRI), we hosted a community thank-you event at the NHCC during which students presented their reflections on oral history as an approach and on this project specifically. Narrators and funders were invited, and students posted their narrators' biographies, including accompanying photos, in the presentation space. Students composed messages of thanks for their narrators, which were then mailed or shared in person at the event. In all, the students collected approximately sixty useable interviews. All materials collected by students from fall 2018 onward will be archived in a public-facing repository.

TAKEAWAYS FOR TEACHING:

CREATING NEW PATHWAYS FOR DIVERSE POPULATIONS

The combined class structure and collaborative research process involved in this project have left us with new questions and topics for reflection. Still, we have several takeaways to use as points of departure for future iterations of these conjoined courses. The first takeaway is that students benefitted from working with more diverse populations in general. All students learned a great deal by interviewing community members who identified as Hispanic and by engaging with a more diverse population of peers. In the first case, students' eyes were opened to historical gradients, actors, injustices, and dynamics they had no idea existed and probably would never have thought to ask about. In the second case, students worked together closely with a classmate who was far outside their usual collegiate or social orbit, coordinating meeting times and interview techniques and checking back in repeatedly with one another about details, dates, and memories.

At an institutional level, although some students enrolled in the Spanish section were also enrolled in the honors college, many others learned about

honors, honors education, and the honors college through the close collaboration with their classmates. Although many students in the Spanish course met the qualifications necessary for applying to the honors college, they cited various reasons that prevented them from applying, foremost among them that they were unaware that the honors college even existed. Our project thus created new pathways for non-honors college students to participate in honors-style, community-engaged undergraduate learning.

As part of a long-term, community-based oral history project, our conjoined classes used experiential learning as the main mode of teaching and learning. As we crossed disciplinary boundaries between Spanish and Portuguese and honors, employing oral history as an inherently interdisciplinary and anti-hegemonic research approach, our students engaged hands-on with communities and individuals in New Mexico and became researchers on our project in ways that made them feel seen and heard. They gained experiences they have demonstrably been able to use outside of class, and their research will leave a meaningful legacy in the existing corpus of research about Hispanic New Mexicans. Most importantly, students grew to appreciate each other, the diverse community in which they live, and the importance of giving back to the Nuevomexicano community through the long-term connections the class fomented. Consequently, we plan another iteration of combined honors and Spanish and Portuguese teaching and research, perhaps approaching the course on the honors side as a capstone transition to graduate study. We recognize that our class does not pose a solution for the two problems posed by Badenhausen, but if we can teach our students that creating connection with community has meaning and that their roles in these types of projects are equally meaningful, we can begin to transform the honors community.

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