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Conocimiento through Spiritual Activism: A Self-Reflexive Approach to Challenging Deficit Beliefs and Reimagining the Value of Teaching in Higher Education

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Abstract

This testimonio, inspired by Anzaldúa's (2002) seven stages of conocimiento, is written in second person to highlight a series of counterstories aimed at guiding readers through the challenges of facilitating teaching conversations in higher education where deficit assumptions about students' potential are prevalent. Readers will gain insight into disparaging and derogatory commentary aimed at silencing voices and the harmful impact these words and behaviors can have on our well-being and students' holistic success in higher education and beyond. Through a journey of empathetic understanding and reciprocal learning, I share guided questions to encourage readers to self-reflect on the need for a shift in how teaching is valued in higher education. Ultimately, I advocate for a call to action that fosters a culture of collaboration and solidarity where student voices are at the center of teaching and learning innovations. Collectively, we can create opportunities where all students can succeed in ways that are meaningful to them while also creating a culture that values instructors' self-reflection, growth, and self-efficacy in teaching.

Keywords: teaching, higher education, self-efficacy, student voice, solidarity, conocimiento

After reading Gloria Anzaldúa's (2002) "Now let us shift... the path of conocimiento... inner work, public acts," you finally understood why a series of professional development activities on teaching effectiveness left you with emotional and physiological pain. In fact, you turned to Anzaldúa's words to find meaning, initiate healing, and resist harmful stereotypes. You embarked on a self-reflexive journey by drafting reflection questions to yourself at each stage of conocimiento, ultimately culminating in this testimonio. The stages of conocimiento are interwoven and call for deep introspection about our values, beliefs, identities, and the new realities we wish to create through spiritual activism and the knowledge we build with every stage. Like Eufracio (2022) whose testimonio "framework creates the critical awareness of the educational injustices that borderland educators and students experience" (pp. 50), you also aimed to build introspective tools to help educators and students remain true to their values and beliefs, prioritize their mental and physical wellbeing, and challenge the injustices of deficit assumptions that permeate higher education in borderland regions. By writing self-reflection questions informed by Anzaldúa's (2002) seven stages of conocimiento, you wrote this testimonio to "bear witness" (Reyes and Rodriguez, 2012, p. 532) to stories often left untold due to fear. One of the most meaningful self-reflexive questions you asked yourself during the sixth stage of conocimiento was: How do you feel when your ideals, values, beliefs, consciousness are questioned and used against you? How do you refrain from feeling a sense of defeat when the actions and behaviors of those in opposition cause physical and emotional hurt and illness?

As you wrote your testimonio, you understood instructors' deeply rooted differences in values and beliefs. But, you believed that, through your "connectionist sense of spirit" (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 568), you could revert years of deficit assumptions about students' academic potential through reciprocal partnerships. Unfortunately, the "blow up" (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 568) as in the sixth stage of

Conocimiento was imminent and the "clash of realities" revealed themselves in your body—inexplicable nausea, vomiting, and chest pain (see Figure 1). While you experienced emotional pain and were aware of your emotional labor, you discarded it as a normal part of the process—a necessary step toward transformative change in teaching. When you associated your physiological symptoms to the resistance you encountered, you had already been to the emergency room twice in the span of a single month. What was the medical doctors' diagnosis? Stress and anxiety. You know, however, that the resistance alongside the dismissive behavior by some faculty participants was the cause of your pain as they left you feeling angry, disappointed, discouraged, and confused. Like the medical diagnosis dismissively being attributed to stress, your workshops on teaching practices that center critical consciousness (Freire, 2000; hooks 1994) and student voices (Cavazos & Chapa, 2023; Cook-Sather, 2020) were also dismissed. Dominant voices in academia will discard your experience. The blame will be placed on you. You're too weak. You're too sensitive. You're not knowledgeable enough. You're not trained in conflict-resolution. You don't validate everyone. A series of you're nots...a series of deficit assumptions about your abilities, your potential as a leader.

Figure 1

Anzaldúa's Seven Stages of Conocimiento

Note: Reprinted from Mora (2021).

This journey taught you to reclaim your power so you can say, "I am a competent and empathetic leader" and "I am resilient and healthy" in your personal, professional, and health experiences. You learned to say and internalize a series of "I am" moments to combat destructive environments so that you can create new collaborative spaces that allow you to fully enact your spiritual activism (Anzaldúa, 2002; Flores Carmona & Rosenburg, 2021). With a renewed sense of your personal and professional values, you write a counterstory as "a method of telling stories by people whose experiences are not often told [...] to expose, analyze, and challenge stock stories of racial privilege and [...] strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance" (Martinez, 2014, p. 70). Moreover, your testimonio aims to "bring to light a wrong, a point of view, or an urgent call for action" (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012, p. 526). Through your counterstory testimonio, you reconstruct specific examples and refrain from referencing disciplinary backgrounds as your only hope is to bring awareness to marginalized voices so we can do better as educators and

administrators in creating spaces of belonging and success responsive to the needs of all our students.

Throughout your professional journey, you have been a reflexive educator who demonstrates your passion for growth by seeking student and peer feedback (Cavazos & Chapa, 2023; Rodriguez et al., 2021). Your passion for collaboration led you to develop a program, informed by established scholarship and similar programming (Cook-Sather, 2020; Cook-Sather et al., 2014), where you collaborate with and mentor dozens of undergraduate students to critically reflect on their learning experiences in the classroom, to critically observe student-instructor interactions in the educational space, and to engage in critical dialogue with instructors about teaching and learning (Cavazos et al., 2023). You imagined building a partnership—a bridge between student and instructor voices that will ensure all students have multiple opportunities to learn and succeed in higher education. Through your weekly interactions, you take note of their sense of agency over their learning and they, too, identify teaching and learning practices that seem to only empower the select few that the educational system has already dubbed as the "successful ones." Most importantly, students also identified the teaching and learning practices that help them learn, especially those that 1.) create a sense of social and academic belonging, 2.) heighten their self-efficacy in their ability to succeed, and 3.) foster relevance toward their aspirations and professional aims. Tinto (2017) has noted these as factors contributing to students' motivation toward learning and persistence in higher education.

Adverse Experience in Professional Development Workshops

You and your student co-presenters diligently prepared for teaching conversations that were a part of a professional development series—researched and read scholarship in the specific discipline, identified relevant examples in the field, reflected on the teaching observations conducted, and analyzed the learning experiences of students in the discipline informed by qualitative and quantitative research conducted. You were hopeful this teaching conversation could be the one that would turn resistance and ambivalence that we previously encountered into amicable dialogue. After all, faculty participants had multiple opportunities to volunteer to be a part of professional development efforts dedicated to teaching effectiveness. Collectively, you discussed how to place the instructors in small groups, and as they walked in, you assigned them to their team. You overheard them jokingly say, "I guess I'm on this side because I need more intervention." Although you felt and later confirmed that this remark was only the first expression of pessimism related to the workshops from the instructors, you chose to be optimistic and thought we all need light humor to get us through a Friday afternoon workshop.

When one of the student co-presenters shared the importance of providing context to otherwise isolated problems or philosophical theories, one of the instructors, mockingly and with a sarcastic tone, picked up a pencil, dropped it, and stated, "What does it matter if I describe where and how something was dropped? Students still need to understand theory, solve an equation, know technical terms with or without context." As you attempted to respond, another instructor jumped in and connected this moment to a previous example you shared informed by student interviews you conducted on learning experiences (Cavazos et al., 2024): "It's like the female student who said that only male pronouns are used in examples. That's just being sensitive to insignificant details. There is content to teach." You are shocked to know there is a lack of empathy in understanding students' needs, especially their desire to see themselves in the curriculum in relevant ways with real-life implications. So, you collectively asked, "If a problem exists in the real world with social, political, gendered, economic implications, why is the technical side of the problem explored and not the real,

social context where it takes place?" They claimed that they do it in specific classes only but adamantly argued this is not necessary across the curriculum. You noted the intriguing claim and referenced renowned scholars across academic disciplines (and specifically within their field of study) who claim the opposite—social contexts, especially those that are culturally relevant and gendered, should be embedded at every stage across the curriculum to build and enhance students' learning experiences and critical consciousness (Addy et al., 2021; Hammond, 2015; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995; McGee, 2020).

They questioned you on the statement, but what do our students at our institution have to say about this? Who has done the research? You have done the research and shared multiple examples from the personal interviews you conducted with students at a Hispanic Serving Institution who noted they experienced more challenges learning in a course in which theories or problems were taught in isolation than when instructors taught issues in specific contexts with real implications (Cavazos et al., 2024). One of the student co-presenters jumped in to reflect on an experience in her discipline of when an example would have been helpful. One of the faculty participants asked, "But did you pass the class?" They dismissed, once again, the students' voices by infringing upon student academic privacy—the very voices they asked to hear when they initially challenged the scholarship. Furthermore, collectively we asked—do we know if everyone in the room is being heard? Are we listening to the student in lecture who feels the class is "intimidating and scary" because it is filled with men? Are we listening to the student who feels his questions are dismissed as something he should have learned in the previous course? As you noticed your students present, you were in awe of their confidence, posture, eye contact—a true inspiration. They are our future educators, scholars, professionals in our community. You thought this is incredible, and perhaps, what the faculty participants might need to connect and reassess their thoughts and implicit biases in teaching practices.

You asked about the assumptions we make about our practices and our students without listening to students' voices—without having the full context. One faculty member's voice stands out and before he spoke, he admitted that it may not be the best comparison, "What you all are arguing for is as if doctors at mental health clinics would listen to their patients for how to best treat them. Is that what we want? We want "our patients" to tell us, the doctors with years of experience and educational training, how to best treat them? To run the clinic." The rest of the faculty participants laughed; they nodded in agreement as to justify the statement. As facilitator, you were shocked and stated, "That is a horrible comparison." The tension is too great for you to bear. A comparison and a mindset like this not only dehumanize patients and students, but it also reifies a narrative of deficit assumptions about those we proclaim to serve, which ultimately hinders reciprocity and collective growth. In fact, you found this comparison only highlighted the relevance of collaborative partnership; medical scholarship argues for the need to integrate the patient into their care and treatment through narrative medicine and patient or person-centered practices (de Pinho et al., 2021; Selzer, 2016). Beyond these degrading remarks, you thought about the students who presented—what they must be thinking, how they must be feeling. You were about to break down into llanto. You couldn't bear one more minute in the room; you felt hot, sweaty. You tried to redirect the conversation; you stated that students should have a voice in their education and that the session's purpose is to reflect on how we grow as educators to ensure our students are successful.

To which an instructor abruptly responded, "The reality is that some students will be successful professionals, and some will not. Some students are not meant to be college students, some aren't meant for greatness." In disbelief, you introduced the next concept, critical consciousness (Freire,

2000; hooks, 1994). When you explored the concept within the context bringing awareness to our communities' needs and individuals' lived experiences to elicit change, you contextualized your own experiences as to why these practices matter when fostering students' self-efficacy and instructors own self-efficacy about their teaching dispositions. You shared your own struggles learning English as a second language and with the instructors who did not believe in your ability to succeed—those who claimed you should fail middle school English class because you learned English as a second language. This too is questioned and dismissed: "You are the exception," they claimed while others nod in agreement. Your attempt to build empathy is shunned and used against you: "You aren't validating the instructor's role; you're only defending the students." Another instructor claimed he too has experienced racism and discrimination—he claimed bias falsely as reverse racism as a White male living in South Texas. And others yelled across the room, "We shouldn't lower expectations for the students; I am teaching how I was taught...with high expectations." You sense a perspective of "If I had it hard, then you should too." While you attempted to empathize with their experiences, you also recognized that their statements come from a place of privilege and you did not hesitate to point out, "The system worked extremely well for you all; the system usually does not work well for marginalized students." Most importantly, the nature of these comments also negates the fact that even at a Hispanic Serving Institution, many students encounter barriers toward their success because institutions of higher education continue to privilege certain experiences and ways of making knowledge over others (Garcia, 2023). You felt they redirected the conversation away from the need to help our students feel a sense of belonging by linking content to relevant experiences and building on their strengths through asset-based approaches, thereby impacting their belief in their ability to succeed (Tinto, 2017). The dismissiveness toward critical consciousness in teaching is met with resistance mainly due to misconceptions that these practices lower learning and assessment expectations.

As questions around equitable assessments arose, you referenced Paul Kei Matusda (2012), a writing scholar who advocates for differentiated instruction and instructional alignment in the teaching of writing. You shared your belief, as informed by research (Cohen, 1987; Matsuda, 2012) that, we should only assess what we teach. If we are not teaching grammar, we should not penalize students for perceived grammar "errors." Instructors challenged and strongly opposed this statement. They questioned whether students deserve a college education while not abiding by grammatical standards or English-only expectations, and some instructors even claimed that we keep students in "literacy poverty" by accepting "mediocre writing" that lowers expectations. The language used conjured negative memories for you as a writer and as an English language learner. Memories of when English teachers questioned your writing abilities, when those who were supposed to be your mentors questioned your ethics as a writer and ability to earn a Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition and who even threatened your academic journey. If you felt this way as a tenured associate professor, how do our students feel when they receive feedback on their writing that tacitly or overtly dismisses their sense of self, identities as writers, and language histories?

As a writing teacher, you value your students' feedback and their agency as writers, so you also listened to your colleagues with an open mind. They have students' best interests in mind; they want them to respond to the social norms of writing and communication that align to a perceived standard because they want students to be successful. You also want your students to be successful writers and communicators in a variety of contexts, so you create varied assessments for students to demonstrate their learning (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017) as they respond to the needs of our communities and advocate for social change. You can't ignore the fact that some of the statements or questions come from a deficit model of education—our students lack something and we, as the

educators in this ivory tower, provide it (Bruton & Robles-Piña, 2009; Freire, 2000). You adamantly claimed, if we ask whether a student should be a college graduate while writing a perceived grammatically incorrect sentence implies that we have the "power" to decide who "should" or "shouldn't" be a college student based on a couple of perceived grammatical "errors." We don't have the power to deny anyone an education because their communicative practices don't align to our perceptions of the "norm."

Deficit Model of Education

If we use Standard American English grammar as a basis to judge and "correct" students' grammar and we severely penalize students by failing an assignment or failing the course, then this is a deficit model of education. A deficit model of education is not sustainable nor linguistically inclusive nor equitable in engaging conversations that challenge the norm (Bruton & Robles-Piña, 2009; Freire, 2000; Pineda, 2022). This model "ignores the learning incomes, in other words the sociolinguistic resources that students bring with them" as Juan Guerra (2016) reminds us. We need to build on our students' cultural and linguistic strengths (Yosso, 2005), so they can leverage their linguistic assets in varied communicative contexts as they make a difference in our communities. Most importantly, we must also build our students' self-efficacy and agency as writers while creating opportunities where they make informed rhetorical and linguistic choices in a variety of genres for different purposes and audiences and in diverse languages, which they will likely encounter within the context of local and global communities (Cavazos, 2019). There is often a misconception that we use "Standard American English" grammar all the time, in all contexts. This is not reality. Once again, your research-informed examples continue to be challenged, mainly because "you don't acknowledge students' responsibility as students, as learners in an English language setting."

You felt you let your students down and that you placed them in an unsafe environment. Students' voices, those who presented and those represented in research you conducted, were gaslighted to fulfill confirmation bias by diffusing responsibility as educators so that the onus is placed on students. While there was attempt after attempt to sabotage the conversation, you and the student co-presenters managed to continue. The workshop ended on a high note—or so you thought—you all advocated for the need to contextualize learning within a social framework relevant to students' learning experiences, prior knowledge, linguistic strengths, and future professional aspirations that will positively impact our communities. One instructor asked if he could make a final commentary. In the moment, you thought that perhaps this might be a glimmer of hope that would help connect perspectives for his colleagues in a meaningful way. The instructor shared, "What I have learned today is what I often experience at home with my wife." In this moment, you realized that what was about to be muttered would be another sexist remark rooted in deficit assumptions. "She has her way of doing things and I have my way of doing things. But, in the end, they still get done [pause, laughter among his colleagues] And, throughout it all, I have learned that most of the time, I do those things better than her. [more laughter]." In disbelief and utterly exhausted, you have nothing else to give. They have exhausted every inch of your patience, spirit, and belief in your ability to lead. They walked out of the room on a Friday afternoon in laughter—the same way they walked in and in the same way they dismissed each conversation, muttering under their breath something about the "needless intervention."

Aftermath of the Professional Development

Upon hearing these words, the glimmer of hope you experienced prior to the start of the teaching conversation slowly and steadily transformed into a dark abyss. Anzaldúa's (2002) words resonated with you more than ever, "Though they may pay lip service to diversity issues, most don't shift from positions of power. The privilege of whiteness allows them to evade questions of complicity with those in power; it gives leave to disrespect other peoples' realities and types of knowledge—race and soul remain four-letter words" (p. 565). How do you shift values so deeply rooted into one's being? Some challenges are expected in professional development where we are exposed to new perspectives. However, when consistent questioning is mixed with sarcasm, superiority, and passive aggressiveness in ways that dismiss, disparage, and disempower, you, no doubt, begin to question your self-worth. The weeks that followed were painful—shame, failure, guilt filled your heart. These emotions exasperated when you received a communication stating that if you could just be silent for once and not "interrupt" the instructors during a workshop, you might just learn something from them. When you read this, you were confused because those who consistently interrupted and even infringed upon student academic privacy were the instructors. You did what facilitators do, you rectified assumptions and misunderstandings, you redirected conversation to the objective of the lesson, you ensured that all student co-presenters had the time and space to share their experiences, knowledge, and expertise.

The blatant attacks were furthered, off record, by others who stated that your mistake was bringing students into the conversation and allowing them to facilitate the workshop with you. Why did they want you to be silent? Why didn't they want students in the room? And, why were they asking for your silence now after they demanded you present them with researched examples from their discipline? Were they afraid you and the students would expose racist, sexist, and entitled behaviors? You modeled for faculty participants the empathetic, respectful, asset-based practices necessary to engage students in a reciprocal conversation about teaching effectiveness. Of course, they didn't want nor expect that a mujer Mexicana de un ranchito que aprendio ingles como segundo idioma would share with them best teaching and learning practices. They didn't expect you would surpass their expectations and become passionate about teaching and learning through a critical consciousness in their discipline of study. This was the moment that led you to the emergency room a second time. This time, with nausea and severe chest pain radiating to your back. In this moment, you realized you would no longer stand by dismissive behaviors. You were deeply hurt. Certainly not because your knowledge as an educator was challenged and dismissed; you've had your fair share of educators questioning your worth and whether you belong in school or in academia for as far back as you can remember. One more set of educators questioning your intelligence only lights the fire within you and your "si, se puede" attitude and your, "I'll prove you all wrong" motto. You were deeply hurt because you felt you did not advocate for your students in the way you should have advocated. This is the real pain you feel. Did you hurt or let down your students?

Despite your attempts to phrase the conversation through an inquiry lens to elicit dialogue toward progress, your voice and students' voices were sabotaged in a myriad of ways to fulfill confirmation biases and defend deficit beliefs about students' abilities. Were you a fool to believe that you could rectify over 50 years of deficit assumptions in just 15 hours' worth of workshops over the span of a semester or two? Of course. Did you and your students deserve the treatment you experienced? Absolutely not. There is no excuse for the level of disrespect and lack of professionalism you encountered during these teaching conversations—on and off record. You refuse to make excuses for misogynist and empowered attitudes and behaviors.

Recommendations

Your connectionist spirit helps you understand the workload demands as well as how the value of teaching effectiveness is positioned in higher education that may have led to resistance. You understand the faculty participants because you, too, are an instructor with multiple, competing demands in higher education. Now, more than ever, you understand that higher education is in a dire need for genuine collaborations on teaching and learning. You understand that to redress over 50 years of deficit assumptions about students' prior knowledge and experiences as well as their potential to succeed, higher education institutions need to reimagine how to engage teaching redesign professional development activities in ways that we normalize the entire process of what it means to be good, empathetic teachers with strong self-efficacy. The following recommendations (see Table 1) are informed by my personal testimonio and the scholarship of notable scholars who have argued for the need to center marginalized voices through critical consciousness (Brown McNair et al., 2020; Freire, 1970; Garcia, 2023; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Love, 2019; McGee, 2020; Yosso, 2005).

Table 1

Recommendations for Building a Collective Culture of Self-Efficacy in Teaching and Learning

Teaching Growth in Solidarity	Recommendations
Ph.D. Coursework and New Faculty Workshops on Best Teaching Practices	An evidence-based best teaching practices course centered on critical consciousness should be implemented as a requirement in all Ph.D. programs across the disciplines and new faculty should be expected to participate in regular reflections on teaching through critical consciousness in a supportive, respectful, and guided environment.
Institutional Support and Funding	When instructors who participate in professional development have many responsibilities, they are unable to fully dedicate the time and effort required and expected when participating in a professional development series on teaching that require thoughtful reflections and revisions to the curriculum. Institutions of higher education must reassess where they place funds and value for meaningful impact on student success.
Time, Effort, Compensation	Transformative teaching practices and curriculum redesign should be given the time needed to engage beyond just six to ten hours per semester in a professional development space. Appropriate compensation for participating instructors for their time and effort beyond a stipend is necessary, especially if they are expected to engage in deep reflections and revisions of their teaching.

Embracing Reflexive Teaching and Learning Practices	- Teaching practices and curricular redesign support resources should promote the following practices on a regular basis: - Ongoing self-reflexive and analysis of personal and academic experiences influencing current values and beliefs about teaching and learning through evidence-based research in teaching and learning. - Receptivity to dialogue with our students that enables us to become aware, identify, and challenge implicit biases and deficit assumptions. - Openness to frequent feedback loops on teaching materials and observations of teaching from multiple perspectives, such as fellow colleagues, administrators, and students in and outside instructors' immediate field of study. - Validation of student voices, experiences, knowledge, assets, and perspectives is central to all professional development activities related to teaching and learning practices aimed at improving student success. - Contextualization of teaching and learning strategies within a critical consciousness framework enabling socio-cultural and socio-technical implications and applications of learning beyond the classroom.
Rigorous Tenure and Promotion and Rigorous Merit System Policies	Reflections on as well as revisions and redesign of teaching practices should be a part of annual review and tenure and promotion guidelines, expectations, and a rigorous merit system policy in ways that recognize the intellectual and emotional labor required from all participants and facilitators. Additionally, engaging in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) should be encouraged and supported, especially for faculty members in tenure-track/tenured positions where scholarly research is expected.
Collective Community Support	Facilitator(s) of professional development in teaching should receive consistent support, advocacy, and fair compensation for their time and effort in guiding curricular redesign, specifically support and collaboration from the leadership that requires and/or expects participation from instructors in their areas.

While you recognize that these institutional challenges need to be addressed in a more holistic manner, you also hold each individual faculty participant accountable for their actions and disparaging commentary that enables deficit assumptions about students and prevents meaningful reflection, collaboration, and transformative dialogue. Most importantly, engaging in professional development that helps us grow as educators should be an intrinsic motivator that is reflective of our own self-efficacy as well—our belief in our ability to teach and help our students succeed. The

universe has a beautiful way of bringing all beings into perfect alignment and synchronicity. We all deserve to tell our truth—this is your story that you hope brings about change and dialogue in meaningful ways that do not silence nor cause pain.

In what ways will you listen to your body, heart, mind, soul to guide your values, beliefs, practices? Where do you choose to draw the line where the clash of realities is so intense that it leads you to question your sense of self, purpose, and self-worth? How do you protect your body, heart, mind, and soul in ways that radiate harmony? You learned that you were working against an entire system—a system that refused change and demanded praise for practices that work for the privileged few. No wonder your body, mind, heart coherence fell apart. Remember Anzaldúa's (2002) words, "Relating to others by recognizing commonalities does not always serve you. The person/group with conflicting desires may continuously attack you no matter how understanding you are. But sometimes you need to block the other from your body, mind, and soul. You need to ignore certain voices in order to respect yourself" (p. 573). These words help you realize that this experience was never about the instructors' hurtful remarks nor them enacting change in their teaching. This experience revealed how you can take a more conscious approach to your health and professional endeavors in ways that you don't question your leadership abilities nor give up on your values. When you finally blocked the other, you realized that the journey was always about how you mentored, connected, and understood your students. They learned a new way to think about their disciplines and recognized the socio-technical disconnect that leads to inequities, and most importantly, they felt empowered to use their voice confidently to advocate for their learning through resistance. You saw and connected with your students under a distinct light by building a sense of solidarity and empathy that transcended time and space—a sense of connectedness that went beyond the professional development activity and impacted your personal lives and journeys. You remained hopeful—when you had the opportunity to engage similar conversations with a new group of instructors and students, you felt vindicated when you witnessed a glimpse of the impact that reflective openness to new ideas can have on identifying areas of growth in our teaching through collaborations with students.

While you hesitated to write your testimonio publicly out of fear, you learned that "[t]he testimonio is not to be kept secret but requires active participatory readers or listeners who act on behalf of the speaker in an effort to arrive at justice and redemption" (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012, p. 527). Now, you call upon your readers to reflect upon the conocimiento they wish to cultivate through spiritual activism—the spiritual activism that Gloria Anzaldúa called upon you when you read her words. Her words gave you the power and will to write about and share these experiences because we need change in how teaching is valued in higher education and how professional development in teaching is conducted. Most importantly, we need change in how we see the students in our classrooms as collaborators and partners in their educational journey (Cavazos & Chapa, 2023; Cook-Sather, 2020). Anzaldúa's (2002) words gave you the freedom to continue building your spiritual activist legacy because "the self is part of the vision a strong sense of personal meaning helps in identity and culture construction. By developing and maintaining spiritual beliefs and values la nepantlera gives the group hope, purpose, identity" (p. 573). Like other scholars (Flores Carmona & Rosenburg, 2021), you modeled for your students and fellow colleagues how taking care of the self and blocking the other was essential to give meaning, purpose, and hope for the collective values we hold to create spaces of belonging and build a culture of self-efficacy and relevance beyond educational institutions (Tinto, 2017). How will you share these experiences with your students to empower them to advocate for their education and cultural and linguistic worth? What will be the counterstories you will share to bring awareness to marginalized voices and perspectives—the stories

that we are too afraid to share with others? How will you center students' voices, experiences, and assets while fostering their cultural and linguistic wealth amidst a clash of realities? What will you do to normalize dialogue and frequent feedback loops on teaching effectiveness as an ongoing process reflective of growth and care?

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Alyssa G. Cavazos is an Associate Professor in the Department of Writing and Language Studies at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley where she teaches undergraduate and graduate coursework in writing studies. Her teaching and research interests center on language difference in the teaching of writing, translingual writing across communities, students' learning experiences, and professional development in higher education. She also serves as the Director for the Center for Teaching Excellence, overseeing professional development initiatives and partnerships. She co-leads the Students as Learners and Teachers at a Hispanic Serving Institution (SaLT HSI) program where students and faculty members collaborate to create meaningful and engaging teaching and learning experiences centered on student voices and success. Alyssa is also a fellow in the University of Texas System Academy of Distinguished Teachers. She is committed to designing linguistically and culturally inclusive educational spaces, which can lead to students' sense of belonging and academic success across academic disciplines in higher education and beyond.

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