

## **Eight Versions of the Visit to *La Barranca*: Critical Discourse Analysis of a Study-Abroad Narrative from Mexico**

**By Julia Menard-Warwick & Deborah Palmer**

At first, I wanted to write this journal on the visit to the Barranca, but then I thought more into it. I feel that most people will feel very emotional and touched right after such a visitation. However, I feel that people may naturally but unintentionally fake such an epiphany, meaning that they may fool themselves that they feel this way but then after a while forget about how they felt then. (Surjit,<sup>1</sup> U.S. student in Mexico)

---

*Julia Menard-Warwick is a professor in the Linguistics Department at the University of California, Davis, and Deborah Palmer is a professor of bilingual/bicultural education in the College of Education at the University of Texas, Austin.*

In 2007, eleven diverse undergraduate students from Texas spent a month in Mexico on a study-abroad program sponsored by the School of Education at their university. A central goal of the program was to facilitate pre-service teachers' ability to articulate a critical understanding of the needs of second language (L2) learners in their future public school classrooms. To this end, the students lived with Mexican host families, visited local schools, studied Spanish, took a Second Language Acquisition (SLA) class focused on immigrant language learners,<sup>2</sup> participated in numerous field trips, and wrote about their experiences in a biweekly journal. In the journal entry above, the

### *Eight Versions of the Visit to La Barranca*

---

only male student in the group reports his decision *not* to write about a field trip that took place in the first week of the program, a visit to a family living in poverty in an area known as *La Barranca* (the Ravine).

In his journal, Surjit raises the possibility that the strong emotions evoked by the visit could lead to what he calls a “fake epiphany,” whose insights will soon be forgotten. Indeed, his seven classmates who submitted (highly emotional) journal entries on the *Barranca* visit never mentioned it again in later journals. Nevertheless, a close reading of the *Barranca* narratives makes it clear that no other event during the study-abroad program brought out such strong feelings and claims of new insight in so many people. Given that a central purpose of the program was to help prospective teachers better understand the backgrounds and needs of Mexican-origin children in their future classrooms,<sup>3</sup> this event would seem to be key to the students’ developing awareness of sociopolitical issues in immigrant education.

In this article, we use critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992) to examine the eight narrative accounts of the *Barranca* field trip and to answer the following questions:

1. What perspectives do the students construct on educational and social issues in Mexico and their own relationship to those issues in writing about the *Barranca* visit?
2. What linguistic resources do the students use to construct their perspectives?
3. To what extent do the *Barranca* narratives demonstrate students’ critical understanding of the potential needs of immigrant students in U.S. public schools?

We conclude by drawing implications for future study-abroad programs that aim to foster critical sociocultural awareness in prospective teachers.

### **Teacher Development**

Given the increasing diversity of students in typical American public school classrooms, it is a high priority in teacher education to prepare prospective teachers to successfully manage linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity (Gay, 2003; Nieto, 2002). Key to this endeavor is critical reflection: engaging students in self-reflective writing and discussion that requires attention to their own identities and that pushes them to deeper understandings of the inequities in education (Alfaro & Quezada, 2010; Brown & Kraehe, 2010; Zeichner & Liston, 1987). While it is never clear what new teachers will carry with them when they enter the classroom, the combination of experiences and reflection in teacher education has the potential to allow students to understand their own privileged positions in society and find ways to actively challenge structural inequalities, rather than come

away “paralyzed” at their own inability to fix the inequalities they have confronted (McDonald, 2005).

Thus, a goal of the study-abroad program was to engage students in critical reflection in order to develop what Villegas and Lucas (2002) call “sociocultural consciousness,” in a deepening union between social awareness and moral commitment (Freire, 1999; Sleeter et al, 2004). According to Freire (1999), when students begin to confront and respond to social problems they gain new understanding as to how these challenges are “interrelated to other problems within a total context,” and “gradually...come to regard themselves as committed” (p. 81). Inspired, like many educators, by Freire’s educational perspectives, we detail in this review of literature previous research on preparing new teachers to critically engage with the sociocultural needs of diverse students.

In describing the understandings that new teachers need in order to work effectively and respectfully with diverse students, Villegas and Lucas (2002) note the importance of exploring the cultural backgrounds of potential students and the cultural identities of the prospective teachers themselves. However, they argue that cultural sensitivity alone is not sufficient. Rather “sociocultural consciousness further entails an understanding that differences in social location are not neutral” (p. 22). Due to differences in power between groups in society, the structure of schooling tends to impede social advancement for working-class children. For this reason, teachers need to understand their own social positions, learn to see connections between schools and society, and “view themselves as agents of change” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 24). From this critical perspective, teachers, like students, need to see the current state of education “not as fated and unalterable, but merely as limiting—and therefore challenging... as an historical reality susceptible of transformation” (Freire, 1999, p. 85).

Garmon (2004) explores the process of sociocultural development through a case study of one White middle-class prospective teacher (Leslie) who had made, in his estimation, exemplary progress in this regard during her four years at his university. Garmon emphasizes that Leslie’s off-campus intercultural experiences, especially volunteering at an inner-city church, were crucial to her growth in awareness, but that it was earlier encounters with diverse students on campus that prepared her to fully engage with people from other communities. Even small events proved to be important, such as watching a documentary film demonstrating that suburban schools in America enjoy much higher levels of funding than inner-city schools. As Leslie commented, “I mean I was so moved by that video! When I got out of that class, I think I must have told 40 people about that. I mean, I cried” (p. 206). In Garmon’s analysis, this classroom encounter with inequity in schools, taken in conjunction with other intercultural experiences, became “a pivotal point in her development” (p. 207).

Thus, Garmon’s 2004 article provides hope for teacher educators who strive to facilitate students’ development of critical sociocultural awareness by combining

### *Eight Versions of the Visit to La Barranca*

---

classroom instruction with what Nieto (2006) describes as “direct contact with people who are culturally different from oneself in a real-life setting which represents the target group’s ‘turf’” (p. 77). Clearly, study abroad programs are one way to accomplish this goal. According to Cushner (2007), when prospective teachers study abroad, they often come to see the global interconnections between unjust sociopolitical and economic structures, and become interested in examining similar justice issues at home. Likewise, reporting on a study-abroad program for U.S. teachers in Mexico, Alfaro and Quezada (2010) argue that participants’ feelings of “cultural, pedagogical, and ideological dissonance” tended to encourage their critical examination of “pedagogical, political, and ideological dimensions of linguistically and ethnically diverse education on both sides of the US/Mexico border” (p. 50).

Nevertheless, it cannot be assumed that study-abroad programs guarantee powerful experiences of linguistic, social, and cultural learning. What matters most is the extent to which a program helps participants “open up...to the experience of otherness” while providing opportunities “to reflect upon and learn from that experience” (Cain & Zarate, 1996, p. 66). For example, Bollin (2007) researched a course that required future teachers to tutor Latino immigrant children in their homes, and found in follow-up surveys that a majority of tutors gained deeper understanding of the social inequities faced by immigrant schoolchildren. While this was a semester-long project, Nieto has found that repeated opportunities to engage in hour-long “cultural plunges” in unfamiliar environments (e.g. a homeless shelter or a Buddhist temple) can help “sensitize student teachers to social and cultural realities, to their own values and biases, and to the students of today’s and tomorrow’s classrooms” (p. 83).

A related approach is the use of *testimonios* in teacher education (González, Plata, García, Torres, & Urrieta, 2003). *Testimonio* can be defined as first-person narrative that witnesses to real-life experience so as to call attention to a compelling issue, such as economic exploitation or political violence. While *testimonios* are recounted by individuals, the teller witnesses on behalf of an entire oppressed community, placing hearers under an ethical obligation to stand in solidarity (Beverly, 2003). Specifically, González et al describe inviting Latino youth to offer presentations in education classes on experiences of marginalization in U.S. schools. As one Mexican immigrant college student told a group of prospective educators, “I owe (my hope) in great part to empathetic teachers, teachers aware that teaching is a political act, because they... dare to empower those who are not meant to be powerful” (p. 237). The authors argue that this use of *testimonio* was effective for developing critical consciousness in teachers.

In this article we analyze education students’ responses to a similar experience with *testimonio* in the context of a study-abroad field trip. In bringing preservice teachers to hear the *testimonio* of one Mexican woman living in poverty and striving to provide for her four children’s education, we intentionally built for the students an experience in which they could engage with a member of an oppressed commu-

nity. This encounter, we hoped, would encourage their awareness of the structural foundations of inequality in schooling and society, and allow them to critically question the commonly held assumption that working-class immigrant parents “don’t care” about education (Bollin, 2007; Nieto, 2002). However, we also believe in the importance of critical reflection for teacher educators. In this article, through the use of critical discourse analysis, we reflect on the extent to which our hopes for fostering sociocultural awareness in these students were actually realized.

### **Methodology**

The study-abroad program from the Texas university lasted four weeks. Out of eleven students, eight were prospective teachers, and ten agreed to participate in this research. While research on prospective teachers has often characterized them as predominantly White, middle-class and monolingual (e.g. Sleeter et al, 2004), this group was ethnically and linguistically diverse (see Table 1). Nevertheless, it should be noted that the group members’ diversity did not automatically provide critical awareness of the educational issues faced by working-class immigrant children.

The school where students studied Spanish was influenced by Freire’s vision of social justice in education. School personnel arranged numerous talks and field trips to introduce the students to social issues in Mexico, as well as to the nation’s rich cultural heritage. The visit to the family living in poverty in *La Barranca* was organized by a Mexican teacher at the school, who knew the family personally, and who thought that it would be valuable for future teachers to listen to their perspective. The students’ SLA class was taught by their Texas professor, the second author of this article; one course requirement was to write biweekly journal entries, using “as much Spanish as possible.” Journals were submitted electronically, and shared with the first author, who did not participate directly in the program. Journal narratives serve as the primary data for this article.

**Table 1**  
**Student Demographics**

Pseudonym	Gender	Major	Ethnicity	Spanish level	Barranca narrative?
Anita	F	Education <sup>4</sup>	African-American	Beginning	Yes
Emma	F	Advertising	Latina	Intermediate	Yes
Irene	F	Psychology	Latina	Advanced	Yes
Jessica	F	Education	Latina	Intermediate	Yes
Kate	F	Education	Latina/Anglo	Intermediate	Yes
Lauren	F	Education	Anglo-American	Intermediate	Yes
Nadia	F	Education	Anglo-American	Beginning	No
Rebecca	F	Education	Anglo-American	Advanced	No
Surjit	M	Education	Indian-American	Intermediate	Yes
Victoria	F	Psychology	African-American	Intermediate	Yes

### *Eight Versions of the Visit to La Barranca*

---

Narratives can be defined as texts that connect events over time—while reflecting on and making sense of these events (Ochs & Capps, 1996). Due to tellers' need to "manage" or understand the significance of particular experiences, narratives do not recount events objectively, but rather offer tellers' *evaluations* of events (Labov, 1972). Although study-abroad narratives (like all narratives of personal experience) are necessarily partial, biased, and not always factually accurate, they nonetheless provide an account of the learners' shifting identities and perspectives (Wortham, 2001), and especially the ways they evaluate their new linguistic and cultural experiences. They are thus essential data for research on the outcomes of study abroad programs. We chose to analyze the *Barranca* narratives in particular because no other event during the program occasioned such strongly affective journal writing by so many people.

In examining these narratives, we employ critical discourse analysis (CDA) to answer questions about teachers' sociocultural development as they prepare to work effectively in diverse communities (Lewis, 2006). We do so with the understanding that prospective educators' use of language has consequences for their future teaching: "certain actions are taken or not because of how social problems are framed" (Rogers & Mosley, 2008, p. 110). Thus, although CDA is generally used to "shed light on the way power relations work... through a close linguistic analysis of texts within a particular sociopolitical context" (Kumaravadivelu, 1999, p. 466), we employ CDA to explore students' *perspectives* on power relations, as their stories construct knowledge, identities, and relationships (Fairclough, 1992; Rogers & Mosley, 2008) within the context of their study abroad program. In so doing, our intent is not to critique these prospective teachers but rather to examine their use of language to "produce new frames of reference, shifts in thinking, interruptions of normalizing discourses" (Lewis, 2006, p. 376) as they "work to make and remake themselves through their (writing)" (p. 377).

Specifically, we coded the *Barranca* narratives for evaluative vocabulary (Martin, 2003), explicit evaluative statements explaining the point or moral of the story (Labov, 1972), words that describe identity (e.g., teacher, American, poor) (Fairclough, 1992), as well as comparisons between participants with different identities, and semantic/thematic roles played by participants within sentences (e.g., agent, patient, experiencer) (Dirven & Verspoor, 1998).<sup>5</sup> Two data tables were constructed, one of linguistic resources common to most or all of the narratives (e.g., variations on the word "inspiring"), and another of resources or perspectives found only in one version of the narrative, as in Surjit's concept of "fake epiphanies" (see opening quote).

### **Findings**

Collectively, the *Barranca* narratives can be described as "bilingual," but language use varied considerably among the eight students: two wrote almost en-

tirely in English; two almost entirely in Spanish; two wrote bilingually throughout, codeswitching intersessionally and intrasessionally; two began in Spanish, and then switched to English. In this section we outline the events and descriptive details common to most of the narratives; then analyze the linguistic resources commonly used by the students to construct their perspectives on the recounted events; and finally note significant areas of difference between versions of the story. We have not corrected quotes from student journals for grammar, spelling, or word choice. English translations of students' use of Spanish appear immediately afterward in brackets. Throughout our analysis, it should be kept in mind that the students' SLA instructor was the primary audience for these journal entries, and this may have constrained what the students wrote.

### **The Core Narrative**

Six of the eight journals shared many elements in common, constituting what we call the core narrative, as the students recount their visit to the home of a single mother, Elvira, and her four children. Six students include a description of Elvira's home and/or its location in the area of the city known as *La Barranca* (the Ravine). For example, Jessica writes, "*Viven en una casa muy pequeña y para caminar a su casa es difícil porque hay muchos escalones* (they live in a very small house and walking to their house is difficult because there are many stairs)." Two students note the number of stairs down into the ravine as 200. Five students include a physical description of Elvira and her children, generally viewing them as "beautiful" or as having "beautiful smiles," as well as being simply dressed.

Since Elvira had told her life story through a translator, six of the students repeat at least part of this story. As Lauren writes, Elvira had left her husband, "*por que él era injurioso y golpeaba a sus hijos y a veces ella. Fueron en el autobús a [name of city]* (because he was abusive and beat his children and sometimes her. They went in the bus to [name of city])." These six students also discuss the schooling experiences of Elvira's children, noting her dedication to educating them but her difficulty in paying the numerous fees involved. Specifically, three students mention that parents must pay for the diploma when a child is promoted to the next grade, while two students note Elvira's housecleaning wages as only 900 pesos per week.<sup>6</sup>

### **Constructing Perspectives**

In this section we detail common linguistic resources that the students use to construct perspectives on their visit to Elvira's home. Specifically, we describe how the students put the *Barranca* visit into a larger social context (or not); the identities that the students construct for themselves and the other characters in their narratives, especially Elvira and her children, as well as the semantic roles that participants play within sentences; the explicit comparisons drawn by students; and finally, the evaluations through which students express their sense of the larger meaning of the encounter.



### *Eight Versions of the Visit to La Barranca*

---

Not all students contextualized the visit; three students apparently assumed that their audience (their instructor) was fully aware of the context they were discussing. When students did write about context, they mostly saw the *Barranca* as exemplifying the national contrast between U.S. affluence and Mexican poverty. As Anita writes:

*Personas en Americana no semos how bueno este nos actually tenemos it, and while niños tienen ocho y nueve años quieren ipods y cell phones, some niños like los unos quien viven in the Barrancas just quieren la comida comen. (People in America don't know how good we actually have it, and while 8 and 9 year old children want ipods and cell phones, some children like the ones who live in the Barranca just want the food they eat).*

The other context invoked by three students was the Mexican educational system. While Anita mentions this in passing—"they are not given the best education and teachers because *están pobre* (they are poor)"—Irene connects Elvira's story to a talk about Mexican educational financing that the students attended earlier in the week: "*La escuela también se dice que es gratuita pero la visita que le dimos a la Señora Elvira nos dio otra voz diferente* (it is also said that schooling is free, but the visit we paid to Señora Elvira gave us another different voice)." Later she adds, "*México con escuela gratuita que chiste, como es posible que los pobres tengan que sufrir tanto?* (Mexico with free schooling what a joke, how is it possible that the poor have to suffer so much?)"

In describing the identities of Elvira's family, four students include them among "*los pobres*/the poor," as in the quotes from Irene and Anita above. This is how Jessica first introduces the family: "*Elvira es una mujer muy joven, como treinta años, tiene 4 hijos, y ellos son muy pobres* (Elvira is a very young woman, about thirty, she has 4 children, and they are very poor)," while Kate adds the thought, "What's even worse, is there are people who live with even little means than she does." Elvira herself is most often identified (also by four students) as a mother, as when Lauren writes, "I hope that whenever I become a mother I can be half the mother Elvira is." Specifying their own identities, students most often call themselves Americans, as in Anita's comment ("people in America don't know how good we actually have it"), and as Spanish learners. For example, Emma writes, "*comprendía todo que nos dije sin la ayuda de traductora* (I understood everything she told us without the help of the translator)."

We also examined the semantic roles assigned by the journal writers to characters in the narrative, as this is a direct way to linguistically analyze attributions of agency (Dirven & Verspoor, 1998). Continuing the contrast between affluent Americans and poor Mexicans, a common semantic role in the journal was that of *possessor*: one who has or lacks possessions. Five students wrote of Elvira as lacking in material goods, but three of these additionally noted Elvira's more spiritual qualities, as when Jessica writes, "I felt that although she was lacking in physical



possessions, she had more love and hope in heart than I have ever seen.” Jessica also uses the semantic role of *possessor* in referring to herself and her own sense of privilege: “I have people who love and care about me and I have the means to achieve whatever my heart desires.” The other semantic role that all students use extensively to refer to themselves (and fellow students) is that of *experiencer*: one who processes thoughts, perceptions, and emotions. This can be seen in Surjit’s opening quote when he says, “I feel that most people will feel very emotional and touched right after such a visitation.”

In contrast, Elvira is far more likely to be given the semantic role of *agent* (Dirven & Verspoor, 1998). Whereas the students describe themselves experiencing thoughts and emotions, they write repeatedly about Elvira acting in the world. Here Lauren combines clauses where Elvira lacks material goods with more numerous clauses that emphasize her agency:

*Ella trabaja mucho. Ella asistía clases para adultos. Pero no tenía pesos para sus clases y clases de sus hijos. Ella decidía que pagar las clases de sus hijos este mas importante. Ahora, cuando sus hijos hacen su tarea, Elvira escribe en el cuaderno.* (She works a lot. She attended classes for adults. But she didn’t have pesos for her classes and her children’s classes. She decided that paying for her children’s classes was more important. Now, when her children do homework, Elvira writes in the notebook).

In describing how Elvira left her abusive husband, students similarly emphasize her agency with approval, as when Anita states, “*Pienso este este bueno esta la madre puede to remove su ninos from the mal situation este they were in back home* (I think this is good that the mother can remove her children from the bad situation that they were in back home.)”

In constructing their perspectives on Elvira and her situation, students frequently use comparison/contrast structures. Some of the most common of these have already been mentioned, as in the juxtaposition of Elvira’s scanty material possessions with her spiritual riches, or the sharp divide between affluent Americans (like the students) and poor Mexicans (like Elvira). Additionally, four students explicitly compare Elvira and her family to case studies in their SLA textbook (Freeman & Freeman, 2001). In Kate’s words, “*Puedo conectar que ella nos dijimos con los libros que nosotros tenemos. Ella está una emigrante como muchas las personas en los libros* (I can connect what she told us with the books that we have. She is an emigrant like many people in the books).”

Although most students wrote extensively about Elvira, her life circumstances, and her story, their most common evaluation (Labov, 1972) of the overall meaning of the *Barranca* visit was more personal. In Kate’s words, “It makes you think about how spoiled you are, and how you should never complain.” However, not all the students bothered to state a moral to the story, and focused rather on evaluating Elvira positively and their own feelings strongly. Emma’s comment, “*La fe y la esperanza de este familia me inspiro* (the faith and hope of this family inspired

### *Eight Versions of the Visit to La Barranca*

---

me),” combines an evaluative report of her own *affective* state (inspired) with a *judgment* of the family as exemplifying the virtues of faith and hope (Martin, 2003). Jessica concurs with these evaluations, and adds one based on aesthetic appreciation as well, “*También, su sonrisa es muy bella!* (Also, her smile is very beautiful!).” Most students mention strong emotional reactions to the visit, which is described by six students as moving, inspiring, or profound, but at the same time called heartbreaking or sad by four of those students. Jessica combines these two types of affective evaluation in one sentence, writing “*su vida es muy triste y también es una inspiración en lo mismo tiempo* (her life is very sad and also is an inspiration at the same time).” Students negatively evaluate the Mexican education system for unfairness to the poor, Elvira’s ex-husband for being abusive, and Elvira’s house for being small and remote.

Thus, of the eight journal entries on the *Barranca* visit, there was great commonality in the six entries which produced what we term the “core narrative,” describing Elvira’s house, recounting Elvira’s story, etc. These six also evaluated the visit as inspiring and/or heartbreaking. In the next section, we explore some departures from the core narrative.

#### ***Individual Variations in Constructed Perspectives***

Despite the common features that students’ *Barranca* narratives shared, we found significant differences in several areas. Several narratives stood out from the group for the way that they contextualized the experience, the identities and semantic roles they assigned to participants, the larger social issues they invoked, or the extent to which they drew implications for their future teaching.

Of the six journals that collectively constructed what we call “the core narrative,” only Irene’s journal contextualizes Elvira’s story as an illustration of the impact of education policies on social development in Mexico. Thus, Irene’s journal has by far the most sophisticated discussion of how Elvira’s story is “interrelated to other problems within a total context” (Freire, 1999, p. 81). She states, “*Las escuelas mexicanas tienen un sistema educativo que pone a estudiantes arriba de otros, dependiendo de cuanto dinero el estado recauda para gastar en escuelas* (Mexican schools have an educational system that puts some students over others, depending on how much money the state collects to spend on schools).” In contextualizing Elvira’s story, Irene alone gives it a wider evaluative meaning: she blames the Mexican government for educational inequities.

Emma, also, takes a distinct approach to the narrative. While many of her classmates felt distant from Elvira (as Jessica writes, “I really could never understand that kind of lacking she’s experiencing”), for Emma, Elvira’s experiences are similar to those of her own mother:

*Elvira le parezco a mi madre..... Mi mama sacrifico todo lo que tuvo por su familia cuando mis abuelos se divorciaron. Y otra vez cuando empezo nuestra familia con mi padre. Desde entonces, he sacrificado todo por mis hermanos y yo.* (Elvira

resembles my mother....My mom sacrificed everything she had for her family when my grandparents got divorced. And again when she started our family with my father. Since then, she has sacrificed everything for my siblings and myself.)

Emma adds that it was Elvira's similarity to her mother that enabled her to understand the story without the aid of the translator. Although several classmates were of Mexican descent, Emma is the only one who expresses this sense of identification with Elvira and her family.

Surjit and Victoria, in contrast, depart significantly from the core narrative, and in fact neither of them mentions Elvira by name. Most of Surjit's journal entry about the *Barranca* visit can be found in the opening quote to this paper. Unlike his classmates, he was suspicious of the emotions arising from the field trip, and for the most part his journal discusses his decision *not* to write about the experience. Whereas Surjit distances himself from his classmates' emotions, Victoria discusses a very different set of emotional and physical reactions:

Today was the first time in a long time that my asthma got to me. I knew I shouldn't have went, especially when they said it was like 200 steps down, but I didn't fell as though I had a choice. I had my inhaler, but my chest hurt even worse when I used it.

Without breaking for a new paragraph, she goes on to complain about her sense of alienation from the study-abroad group: "And it wouldn't be that bad if other students wouldn't just brush what I say aside because they don't know what its like and they never will." Although these remarks are cryptic, in the context of her other journal entries it is clear that Victoria is discussing the racism directed against her as an African-American in Mexico, where people treat her, in her words, like a "tourist attraction."

Thus, in not reproducing the core narrative about *La Barranca*, both Surjit and Victoria distance themselves from the perspectives of their classmates—but for very different reasons. Indeed, Victoria's journal raises a new set of identity issues, in which the main contrast is not between (affluent) "Americans" and (impoverished) "Mexicans" but between people who are of African descent and those who are not. Unlike her classmates, she puts herself repeatedly into the semantic role of *patient*, one who undergoes (Dirven & Verspoor, 1998), while her classmates are *agents* who treat her badly. In this framework, Elvira's story fades in importance.

Although none of Victoria's classmates portray the world through this racialized lens, there are other ways that individual students stray from the U.S./Mexican binary. Both Lauren and Irene bring up social class, although in different ways. Irene alone among the group writes about rich Mexicans. For example, she says "*Como vimos en las historias del libro y la historia que nos contó Elvira, son las personas con dinero quienes reciben una educación superior a los pobres.* (As we saw in the stories in the book, and the story that Elvira told us, it is the people with money who receive an education superior to the poor.)" Unlike her classmates who

### *Eight Versions of the Visit to La Barranca*

---

see Elvira as an *agent*, Irene regards her and other poor Mexicans as *patients* as well (Dirven & Verspoor, 1998), who suffer from economic inequity and need help from their government: “*Si México quiere que los habitantes de estados con menos recursos económicos se superen no es posible sin su ayuda* (If Mexico wants the inhabitants of states with fewer economic resources to get ahead, it’s not possible without the help of the nation).” While Irene discusses Mexican inequities, Lauren negatively evaluates U.S. homeless people in contrast with Elvira: “In [Texas], I never give money to the homeless . . . . However, Elvira is much different. She does work very hard for the little she has and she deserves so much more.”

Somewhat surprisingly, although the trip was designed to give education students insights for their future classrooms, only Jessica responds as a prospective teacher in her *Barranca* journal entry. Elvira’s story, especially her account of her daughter’s health problems, led Jessica to the following pedagogical conclusion: “It reminds me that even though a child may not be reaching all their goals in classes, it might not be just because they ‘can’t’ or because they don’t want to; it might also be because they could be having serious issues at home.” Given that this visit aimed to shed light on the challenges impoverished parents face in supporting their children in school, it is disappointing that more students did not see educational implications to Elvira’s story. Like her classmates, in hearing about Elvira’s struggles, Jessica heard a message about her own privilege. However, like Irene, Jessica understood that Elvira’s story carries a collective message about education: “as a teacher it is important to be aware of student’s conditions at home because it could have a serious affect on how they perform in school.”

### **Discussion: Affect Versus Analysis?**

In writing this article, we define “critical awareness” as an increasing consciousness of the structures of power that define relationships among people and institutions, such as schools and governments (Freire, 1999). Critically-aware teachers know that racism, sexism, classism, etc. play a role in schooling, and they work to foster equitable relationships in their schools and classrooms. Aware of larger discourses of power, they work locally to counter them (Sleeter et al, 2004; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). In the context of a study-abroad trip to Mexico, critical awareness should involve a realization of how political and economic structures are connected globally and locally (Alfaro & Quezada, 2010; Cushner, 2007). Our own critical reflection as teacher educators demands careful appraisal of the extent to which these students demonstrated increased awareness as a result of their visit to Elvira’s home.

While these study-abroad participants cannot be fully described as aware or unaware, critical or uncritical, we see the visit as potentially significant in their on-going development of awareness (Garmon, 2004). We cannot discount the possibility raised by Surjit that at least some of the epiphanies claimed by students in their

journals were “fake” or temporary, but we see value in revisiting here the perspectives that the students constructed in their *Barranca* journals on educational and social issues in Mexico. Generally, the students saw Elvira as a heroic individual raising her children in poverty, but with great faith and hope. The visit to her house was collectively seen as inspirational, profound, and heart-breaking. They described the family as lacking in physical possessions, but also as beautiful and hard-working, and they invested many evaluative resources in portraying the family as morally admirable. They compared Elvira and her children to the case-studies in their SLA textbook (Freeman & Freeman, 2001), and contrasted the family’s simple lifestyle with their own affluence and privilege. Describing the actions that Elvira had taken to improve her lot, they invested her with grammatical agency, while portraying themselves as *experiencers*, mentally processing this powerful interaction.

However, based on their narratives, the students’ affective response to Elvira’s plight was generally far clearer than their critical understanding of her social context. For the most part, they did not discuss the transnational socioeconomic inequities that leave women like Elvira (and Emma’s mother) few options besides sacrificing themselves to take care of their children. The students’ grammatical recognition of Elvira’s agency in the face of misfortune is commendable, but only Irene seemed to understand that Elvira was fighting against overwhelming odds imposed by a sociopolitical system. Moreover, only Jessica used this opportunity to reflect on how she as a teacher could respond constructively to similar poor families in future. The students’ admiration for Elvira and recognition of their own privilege can be seen as steps on the way to a critical perspective, but steps that fall short of the awareness necessary to act effectively in solidarity (Rogers & Mosley, 2008; Sleeter et al, 2004). The *Barranca* narratives bring up important issues, such as homelessness in the United States and racism in Mexico, but with the partial exception of Jessica’s, they do not demonstrate students’ understanding of the needs of immigrant students in U.S. schools.

Thus, the *Barranca* narratives illustrate both the value and the limitations of using *testimonio* in teacher education (González et al, 2003). Like other *testimonios* in the literature, Elvira’s story drew on her individual experiences to witness to larger problems of poverty, gender violence, and marginality, which affect not only her, but an entire oppressed community. Arguably, hearing Elvira’s *testimonio* placed the Texas students under an ethical obligation to stand in solidarity with impoverished Mexican families (Beverly, 2003). However, the students’ view of Elvira as a quintessentially heroic individual did not seem to inspire them toward solidarity with the collectivity of struggling single mothers in her city, nation, or hemisphere. They found Elvira’s *testimonio* moving, but for the most part the only lesson they drew was a recognition of their own privilege. Thus, although planned educational encounters with “people who are culturally different from oneself in a real-life setting” (Nieto, 2006, p. 77) can potentially help prospective teachers to develop empathy for future students or their families, such encounters are not sufficient to make prospective teachers see

### *Eight Versions of the Visit to La Barranca*

---

connections between schools and social structures, nor view themselves as “agents of change” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 24).

Nevertheless, as Garmon (2004) writes, it is *repeated* intercultural experiences that “stimulate....multicultural growth by pushing (prospective teachers) out of (their) comfort zone(s)” (p. 212). The development of critical awareness is a process that takes time (Freire, 1999; Sleeter et al, 2004), and has both affective and cognitive dimensions (Cushner, 2007). Although Elvira’s *testimonio* may not have sufficed to impress these prospective teachers with the moral imperative to become change agents (Bollin, 2007; Villegas & Lucas, 2002), the visit to La Barranca could eventually be seen as “a pivotal point in (their) development” (Garmon, 2004, p. 207). If after a week or month in Mexico they could not yet see all the sociopolitical ramifications of Elvira’s story, we nonetheless hope that their powerful emotional response may have increased their future openness “to critically examin(ing) the pedagogical, political, and ideological dimensions of linguistically and ethnically diverse education on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border” (Alfaro & Quezada, 2010, p. 50).

#### **Implications for Pedagogy: Structuring Reflection**

For Freire, the purpose of education is to “name the world” (1999, p. 68), that is, to bring the structures of society into conscious awareness through language, in order to “transform the world” (p. 69). This naming and subsequent transformation takes place in “dialogue” (p. 69) between learners and educators, an encounter in which “there are neither utter ignoramuses nor true sages; there are only people who are attempting together to learn more than they now know” (p. 71). From this perspective, the purpose of a study-abroad program for pre-service teachers is to bring them together in dialogue with people they would not otherwise encounter. It was for this purpose that the *Barranca* visit was arranged by one of the teachers at the Freire-influenced language school. Moreover, it was for opportunities like the *Barranca* visit that the course was taught in Mexico rather than on campus in Texas. Of course, one does not have to go to Mexico to connect with families in poverty and listen to their stories. Nevertheless, the study-abroad program in general and this field trip in particular were intended to help students contextualize the challenges parents can face in supporting their children in school.

In planning the visit, the teacher educators hoped that along with developing greater comprehension into the challenges faced by families, the students would begin to realize that they should never take children’s circumstances at face value, but rather assume there is much they do not know—and hold off judgment. In our work we have found that teachers may hold a deficit view of immigrant families, particularly with regards to how well the parents “support” their children’s education (Bollin, 2004; Nieto, 2002). If they do not see conformance with middle class norms (i.e., helping with homework, reading to children, volunteering in classrooms,



serving on PTA and fundraising for the school), then they often assume the parents “don’t care.” The opportunity to speak with a woman who has struggled to keep her four children studying against all odds was intended to rupture some of these deficit viewpoints.

Nevertheless, as we draw upon discourse analysis to critically reflect on our own pedagogy as teacher educators, we must note how our results fell short of our goals. The fact that Jessica alone articulated pedagogical implications of the *Barranca* visit indicates that the program’s efforts to prepare and debrief the students for this field trip, though necessary, were insufficient. The Mexican teacher who arranged the visit talked to the students beforehand about what they were going to see, and their SLA instructor facilitated a discussion in her class afterwards, while the journal assignment offered students an additional opportunity to reflect on the visit and what it meant to them. Our analysis of their journals, however, shows that most students did not get past their initial emotional response into a critical analysis of what the visit meant to them as future teachers, nor how Elvira’s difficulties could be seen as “interrelated to other problems within a total context” (Freire, 1999, p. 81). Thus, we cannot emphasize too strongly the importance of in-depth preparation beforehand and ample time for *structured* reflection afterwards. In a short-term study abroad program, the temptation is to fill students’ time with classes, homework, cultural events, trips, museum visits, and guest lectures. However, learning experiences are only valuable when students have time to fully reflect on them—and to connect them explicitly with their study-abroad objectives (Cain & Zarate, 1996).

According to Sleeter et al (2004), teacher educators need to provide scaffolded support for students’ development of critical awareness—such as preparing materials, organizing field experiences, and facilitating dialogue—and then gradually let go to leave room for students to construct their own learning. Both preparation and debriefing around field experiences can be organized as this kind of scaffolded dialogue, giving students the tools to continue learning from intercultural encounters in the future. At the preparation stage, this is principally a matter of providing the background information that students need to comprehend the significance of the experience, while crucially making space for student concerns (such as Victoria’s justifiable anxiety about the effect of hill climbing on her asthma). Follow-up sessions, both face to face and through reflective writing assignments, are even more crucial. These also need to be carefully planned, so that students have space to work through their immediate emotional reactions, but also time and encouragement to do the harder work of critical analysis.

Once students have had a chance for emotional processing, they should be asked explicitly to place what they have seen into a larger social context. In the case of the *Barranca* visit, all the students (not just Irene) could have been required to draw connections between the earlier presentation on school funding in Mexico and Elvira’s individual experiences. If study-abroad students have career interests in the trip, they should likewise be required to articulate the importance of the



### *Eight Versions of the Visit to La Barranca*

---

experience for their professional development (Nieto, 2006). In retrospect, the following reflection questions could have been useful for these students:

What prevented Elvira from seeking her own education?

What conditions might have supported her to achieve her goals?

Why is there such a great disparity between her world and ours?

What could help change her situation?

What lessons have you learned about working with similar families in the future?

We feel that the students would have benefited from more explicit opportunities for written or oral self-reflection at all stages of this experience: before their visit with Elvira, immediately after, and then a week or two later. Ideally, a combination of oral and written reflection would give students the opportunity to explore and rehearse their ideas with others, as well as to hear and build upon others' reflections and to respond to the instructor's queries, and thereby to take their own perspectives further and deeper. Such repeated, multimodal reflection has been shown to have great potential in helping pre-service teachers move from theory (or raw emotion) into potential impact upon practice (Gay, 2003; Brown & Kraehe, 2010). Such connections to practice can potentially help students to further develop critical consciousness—and clearly these students needed explicit encouragement in order to make such connections (Gay, 2003). For future teachers, this is probably the most important part of critical reflection.

Finally, we continue to see great pedagogical value in having language learners, when possible, carry out some of this reaction and analysis in their L2—especially for future teachers who need to understand the challenge that academic L2 use represents for immigrant students. However, study-abroad instructors should themselves be aware of how time-consuming and stressful this can be. Although many programs make students take “L2 only” pledges upon embarking, students may need the option to conduct this kind of emotional processing and critical analysis in their first language, in order to make sure that undeveloped language skills do not impede other learning objectives. Instructors can take responsibility for encouraging students to use their L2 when possible, to relax when stress levels get too high, but to persist in the work of critical analysis and sociocultural development.

### **Conclusion**

The Texas students' bilingual reflective journals illustrate how one short visit with a culturally-different person “on her own turf” (Nieto, 2006, p. 77) can be a highlight of a month-long program. They demonstrate the emotional power of *testimonio* as pedagogy (González et al, 2003), while raising questions as to the

impact of one-time events on longer term processes of critical sociocultural development in pre-service teachers (Brown & Kraehe, 2010; Garmon, 2004). They strongly suggest the importance of guided reflection to facilitate preservice teachers' growth of critical awareness through intercultural encounters—as well as to help preservice teachers avoid a sense of paralysis in the face of structural inequalities (McDonald, 2005). If any of the new teachers who met with Elvira in May 2007 is inspired by that experience to offer an attentive ear to an immigrant parent on a busy afternoon, her *testimonio* will not have been wasted.

### **Acknowledgments**

We thank “Elvira” for her *testimonio*, Augustina for arranging the *Barranca* visit, and the Texas students for letting us analyze their journals. Thanks as well for insights from graduate students in both Karen Watson-Gegeo's 2009 discourse analysis class at University of California, Davis and the narrative analysis workshop in the Psychology Department at Universidad de Chile, July 2010.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> The SLA course was taught by the second author of this article, who supervised the study-abroad program, and collected the data for this research project with the permission of the students.

<sup>3</sup> Mexican immigrants are a significant demographic group in Texas schools (as in many other U.S. states). In 2007-2008, approximately 15% of Texas public school students were classified as both “Hispanic” and “Limited English Proficient” (LEP). “Hispanic” students constituted 93% of LEP students (Texas Education Agency, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Education is not an official major in Texas universities. We are using this as a cover term for a variety of related majors, such as Mathematics plus teaching certificate, or Applied Learning and Development with ESL certification.

<sup>5</sup> Semantic role refers to the relationship between a noun phrase and a verb. For example, in the clause, “The parakeet bit the cat,” the semantic role of “parakeet” is *agent* (one who acts), while the semantic role of “cat” is *patient* (one who undergoes) (Dirven & Verspoor, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Approximately \$85 USD.

### **References**

- Alfaro, C., & Quezada, R. (2010). International teacher professional development: teacher reflections of authentic teaching and learning experiences. *Teaching Education, 21*(1), 47-59.
- Beverly, J. (2003). *Testimonio*, subalternity, and narrative authority. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (pp. 319-335). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bollin, G. G. (2007). Preparing teachers for Hispanic immigrant children: A service learning approach. *Journal of Latinos and Education, 6*(2), 177-189.
- Brown, K., & Kraehe, A. (2010). When you've only got one class, one chance: acquiring socio-cultural knowledge using eclectic case pedagogy. *Teaching Education, 21*(3), 313-328.
- Cain, A., & Zarate, G. (1996). The role of training courses in developing openness to Other-

### *Eight Versions of the Visit to La Barranca*

---

- ness: From tourism to ethnography. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 9(1), 66-83.
- Cushner, K. (2007). The role of experience in the making of internationally-minded teachers. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 34(1), 27-39.
- Dirven, R., & Verspoor, M. (1998). *Cognitive exploration of language and linguistics*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Freeman, D. E., & Freeman, Y. S. (2001) *Between worlds: Access to Second Language Acquisition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Freire, P. (1999). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. 20th Anniversary Edition. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum Publishing.
- Garmon, M.A. (2004). Changing preservice teachers' attitudes-beliefs about diversity. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 55(3), 201-213.
- Gay, G. (2003). Developing cultural critical consciousness and self-reflection in preservice teacher education. *Theory Into Practice*, 42(3), 181-187.
- González, M.S., Plata, O., Garcia, E., Torres, M., Urrieta, L. (2003). Testimonios de inmigrantes: Students educating future teachers. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 2(4), 233-243.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (1999). Critical classroom discourse analysis. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33(3), 453-484.
- Labov, W. (1972). *Language in the inner city: Studies in the Black vernacular*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lewis, C. (2006). "What's discourse got to do with it?" A meditation on Critical Discourse Analysis in literacy research. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 40(3), 373-379.
- Martin, J. R. (2003). Introduction. Negotiating heteroglossia: Social perspectives on evaluation. *Text*, 23(2), 171-182.
- McDonald, M. (2005). The integration of social justice in teacher education: Dimensions of prospective teachers' opportunities to learn. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 56(5), 418-435.
- Nieto, J. (2006). The cultural plunge: Cultural immersion as a means of promoting self-awareness and cultural sensitivity among student teachers. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 33(1), 75-84.
- Nieto, S. (2002). *Language, culture, and teaching: Critical perspectives for a new century*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Ochs, E., & Capps, L. (1996). Narrating the self. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 25, 19-43.
- Rogers, R., & Mosley, M. (2008). A critical discourse analysis of racial literacy in teacher education. *Linguistics and Education*, 19, 107-131.
- Sleeter, C., Torres, M. N., & Laughlin, P. (2004). Scaffolding conscientization through inquiry in teacher education. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 31(1), 81-96.
- Texas Education Agency. (2009). *Enrollment in Texas public schools, 2007-08*. Retrieved 2/20/09 from [http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/research/pdfs/enrollment\\_2007-08.pdf](http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/research/pdfs/enrollment_2007-08.pdf)
- Villegas, A. M., & Lucas, T. (2002). Preparing culturally responsive teachers: Rethinking the curriculum. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(1), 20-32.
- Wortham, S. (2001). *Narratives in action: A strategy for research and analysis*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Zeichner, K., & Liston, D. (1987). Teaching student teachers to reflect. *Harvard Educational Review*, 57(1), 23-49.