

The Living Color of Students' Lives: Bringing *Cajitas* into the Classroom

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I am a professor of Latino and Ethnic Studies whose main objective is to create and foster a community of artists. Such a goal may be considered quite ambitious and even absurd coming from someone who possesses no formal training in the arts. However, in attempting to identify the single most important quality of my teaching in the classroom, I implement this community of artists metaphor that enables me to capture my teaching and pedagogical strategies with an eye toward impacting and transforming the lives of students.

I write this essay with the intent of sharing insights into my teaching pedagogy and strategies as illustrated through my "sacred box" or *cajita* projects that I have implemented into my courses for the past seven years to commemorate *El Día De Los Muertos* (Day of the Dead). In this essay, I outline the background and initial ideas that crystallized into this class project and describe the impact of the project on myself and on the lives of students. First, I begin our discussion with a reflection of my teaching philosophy and my attempts to reinforce these perspectives through a two-month-long *cajita* assignment. From there, I describe the *cajita* project itself and conclude with a discussion as to the significance of this project and the need for grounded teaching strategies in the classroom.

Continuing with my student as artist metaphor, in my mind, when students enter the classroom, they bring their lives and experiences on a painter's palette where an artist lays and mixes the range of living colors symbolic of a person's life journeys and experiences. In turn, as a teacher I offer my students a painter's canvas in the form of lectures, discussions, readings, and assignments representative of a canvas of knowledge where students, utilizing this space, are inspired and motivated to explore the range of living colors on their palettes that speak to their lives in deep and profound ways.

This philosophy is best illustrated through the insights offered by the poet T.S. Eliot that I hold near to my heart as teacher and educator. The

The author wishes to acknowledge the work of Felix Padilla, Laura Rendon, and David Abalos who inspired this essay.

Religion & Education, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Fall 2002)
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fourth movement of *The Four Quartets* entitled *Little Gidding* informs us that throughout our entire lives:

We shall not cease from exploration
And in the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time¹

The words of Eliot guide and support my convictions as an educator that the foundation of our knowledge base is located within us. The answers are already in us, and it is the role of the educator to gently guide and direct us so that we can search within ourselves for answers. All past and present knowledge that is before us represents the familiar. It is the role of the educator to organize and shape this familiar knowledge in a new way that has not been thought of before, and, as a result, brings forth a new understanding of the familiar.

As a further illustration, I am reminded of my father's work philosophy of *cambiar* versus *reparar*. As a young man, my father grew up poor in the small town of Ocotlán, Jalisco, Mexico where he inherited the nickname of *El Arastrador* ("the dragger") because he continually collected broken items such as watches and old radios for him to repair and sell for profit. Fifty years later he continues to financially sustain himself having now expanded into repairing televisions, washing machines, and stereos. If you talk to my father about the work that he does, he will make it a point to separate himself from his more contemporary repair colleagues by informing you that unlike himself his contemporaries do not repair things ("*no reparan las cosas*") – but simply replace ("*cambian*") old parts with new ones. To simply replace without repairing is without merit ("*no tiene chiste*") in his mind.

There is much to be learned from the philosophy my father has toward his work. To "*reparar*" that which is already there translates into investigating, analyzing, and interrogating that which is already within us and work from there. Furthermore, the process of "*reparando*" allows us to uncover new ways of doing things and come to a better understanding of the energy and agency behind what makes things truly work. It presents us with an opportunity to understand how familiar things might work in new and different ways. The idea of "*cambiar*" reminds us that we must be careful with those sources that we bring from the outside to make sure that they are carefully woven into the overarching narrative of the classroom, and we must make sure that it does not disrupt the flow of internal discov-

ery and external revelation. Through the *cajita* project, students are able to draw from their palette of living colors, and, as underscored by the philosophies of Eliot and my father, they are drawn to look at the familiar in their lives in new and different ways as they move toward appreciating and embracing their personal histories and stories.

For the past seven years during the fall semester, I have made it a point to teach courses related to Chicana/o Cultures, Latina/o Identities, and the History of Religion of Aztlán at three different universities: the University of California Santa Barbara, Arizona State, and Brown University. Within these courses, I have facilitated the creation and crafting of a “knowledge canvas” comprised of the multiple colors and range of topics related to Latina/o and Chicana/o cultural expressions and experiences. Out of this, students have been asked to imagine, create, and perform what I have come to identify as sacred boxes or *cajitas*. These *cajitas* are literally boxes of various shapes, forms, and sizes made out of wood or cardboard. The assignment is introduced at the beginning of the fall semester and continually discussed throughout the months of September and October to recognize and honor *El Día de Los Muertos* (The Day of the Dead) celebrations commemorated and observed the first and second of November throughout Mexico and the United States. Traditionally, November first is known as *El Día de los Angelitos* to celebrate children whereas November second honors those who died as adults. The students’ *cajitas* become the centerpiece of a one-day campus-wide celebration held yearly in commemoration of the Day of the Dead.

On these days, it is believed that the spirits of deceased return to their gravesites to commune in spirit with their loved ones living on earth. These observances and practices have their roots and origins in pre-Columbian Mexico where as early as the preclassic period the dead are said to have partaken on a four-year northern journey to *Mictlán* (“the place of the dead”) ruled by *Mictlantecuhtli* and *Mictēcacihuatl*. With the soul of the deceased in transit to *Mictlán*, it was considered common practice to make offerings to the dead at various moments: at death, eighty days later, and on the anniversary of the death for the next four years. Offerings of pottery, vessels, personal ornaments, food and drink, and even toys were commonly buried with the deceased. Annual celebrations and observances were said to replenish the deceased on their journey. Numerous examples of monthly indigenous celebrations have been documented by Franciscan Friars that demonstrate a history of celebrating and honoring powerful deities in conjunction with those who died in a manner that was associated with what the deity symbolized. For example, between late October and November communities engaged in fiestas honoring the war God *Mixcoatl* and all those

who had died as a result of war. It was common for celebrants to sit by the deceased's gravesites all day and night, and on the last day of the month, everything, except certain food items such as tamales, was ignited thereby symbolizing that by burning them they would be in the afterlife waiting for them upon their death.

As a result of indigenous traditions, one of the most popular practices for Day of the Dead celebrations today, in particular in rural communities in Mexico, is for families to return to community cemeteries and clean the gravestones and markers of their loved one. They then remain at their gravesite into the evening, and they offer the dearly departed favorite foods and libations. Traditionally, cemeteries are brightly lit with candles and colorfully decorated with marigolds which act as signposts for the spirits of the deceased and assist them in finding their way to the cemetery and back. When the deceased consist of children, sugar skulls and breads along with toys will also be present. Similar practices are observed in rural parts of the American Southwest within the United States in historic and traditional Mexican/Chicano communities. However, the majority of U.S. celebrations occur as festivals to commemorate the day of the dead in urban communities outside the confines of the cemetery.

Similar to observances and practices in urban metropolitan centers of Mexico, cities like Los Angeles, San Antonio, and Phoenix commemorate the departed through the transformation of public space into public altars that acknowledge the passing of the deceased and marks their contributions to one's life. The creators of these altars may not have personally known the deceased. In fact, it is common that these public tributes are created in order to recognize and acknowledge the contributions of well-known celebrities who have touched the lives of many. These public altars are transformed into public testimonies and narratives for all to admire and to learn something about their lives. Some good examples would be altars dedicated to the lives of Selena, César Chávez, or Tito Puente. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for these public altars to become political statements on behalf of oppressed communities and their struggles for social change and social justice. In the most recent Day of the Dead celebration that I organized, my students honored the less-affluent victims of the Twin Towers tragedy through the creation and construction of a collective *cajita* or public altar that recognized the lives and contributions of restaurant workers and custodians (many of who were immigrants and people of color). About three years ago, we paid tribute to the countless children, women, and men, who over the years have lost their lives as they attempted to successfully traverse the U.S.-Mexico border, through a large *cajita* and display to recognize their passing and to bring recognition to their plight.

As a majority of my courses focus on cultural identity and religion, I incorporate *cajita* assignments into the classroom in order for students to have practical, hands-on, and experiential knowledge about Mexican and Chicano cultural expression. As I have attempted to capture in my Penitente scholarship, the objective here is for students to actually live, experience, understand, and document the agency of culture. It is important that students recognize culture as a living and constantly changing reality that is with us and alive in the history and stories of people, and for the majority of my students, it represents part of their own personal history or biography.

Another very important teaching objective for me, is to recognize and account for the intersection of academic intellectual knowledge with that of the everyday life experience. I believe it is my job to challenge students to explore how to apply the knowledge that they have obtained in class into their everyday lives, in their work environment, and with their families. One of my major challenges as a teacher is to continually explore how to make abstract concepts and ideas come alive for students in order to get them excited about classroom topics. When this occurs, then I believe they will recognize the importance of how their work interacts with the real life issues and problems in their lives. Students realize that their personal stories, histories, and traditions constitute the multiple and complicated canvases that represent the living colors of their lives, and through teaching and learning about them, they become validated as important. The *cajita* project allows students to make connections and articulations via their boxes because students are encouraged to create a story of ancestry, of family, of biography, and of history associated to their interpretation and understanding of the day of the dead. It is about recognizing those who came before us and celebrating their contributions and importance. It is about recognizing something that family, ancestry, and community represents, understanding their agency, and celebrating their contributions to this society.

Over the years, students have crafted and imagined *cajita* projects that are truly remarkable and breath taking. From cardboard boxes to hand crafted boxes, students have expressed their relationship to their families, honored loved ones who have passed, recognized the contributions of deceased celebrities, and made strong political statements about the Chicano movement. Items such as personal jewelry, green cards, family pictures and portraits, newspaper articles, candles, food, libations, and prerecorded music have been utilized to express students' recognition of *El Día de Los Muertos*, and to acknowledge their interpretation and contribution to the movement.

Students are asked to compose a one-page vignette for their box in order to contextualize and give meaning to their personal creations. This

can take the shape of a personal narrative, a poem, a dedication, or even family recipes. All of these written stories represent an important compliment to the material story crafted and created, and they are always very moving. As a celebration that seeks to challenge traditional ways of knowledge, it is interesting to observe that whereas students are asked to create a box from which to imagine and perform their interpretation of culture, family, and ancestry in connection with the Day of the Dead, the most profound and interesting projects have been those that spill outside of the boxes and that actually become displays or public shrines in honor of family and loved ones or those making political statements. Since the boxes are displayed upon tables, students utilize the space to share their stories.

The impact on the lives of students has been quite tremendous. Students will speak deeply as to how this project has changed their lives and how they feel validated by being able to create a space where they can tell their own story. I think this is particularly true of people who find themselves on the margins or between worlds; the *cajita* project validates their existence and more importantly celebrates it! The project allows students to make connections with their past; many students have never had the opportunity to recognize nor have been allowed to do so, and the *cajita* project helps to heal the past. I have seen a transformation in countless students who were for so many years taught to ignore or feel shame about their culture and their language, and, for once, they now can be validated and recognize these expressions, their personal links, and stories to this family ancestry. I remember one case where a student never knew his father, and through the project, he came to know who his father was as well as the important contributions he had made in life. Once the projects are done, they become personal shrines. Students have often mentioned to me that they could now take these works and make them part of their lives, and that they will remain with them.

Another important element of my class project is that I make it a two month long project that I introduce at the beginning of the semester. This facilitates the time required for students to grow, and then their hard work is unveiled during a Day of The Dead celebration that is held on campus and is open to the public on or around the second of November. This event becomes a crucial time to educate the entire school about the importance of this celebration, to debunk all of the preconceived myths around the celebration, and to clearly distinguish it from Halloween. I believe that it is critical to underscore the importance of the pre-Columbian roots and origins of this cultural expression, and how they still remain with us despite having gone through various changes and transformations. Our gatherings are always a celebration of community, ancestry, and culture. Without losing

the importance and significance of this Mexican/Chicano celebration and observance, one can draw linkages with other cultures, especially communities of color, and definitely with other Latino communities making it a pan-Latino celebration. It is necessary to emphasize the overarching values and significance of this celebration.

The conversations and connections that brought forth the idea behind the *cajita* project and linking it to El Día de Los Muertos occurred in conversation with Dr. Santos Vega from Arizona State University who was in charge of a community documentation program at the Hispanic Research Center at Arizona State University. He shared with me a *cajita* project that a colleague had put together with her students that inspired me to develop a similar assignment with students in my courses. In turn, my class projects have influenced colleagues at other universities. My objective and focus has been to link the performance and construction of the *cajita* as a statement of history and legacy of specific families and communities. The images, words, and personal artifacts put together by students within a sacred box represent larger metaphors of family, community, history, and ancestry. The materiality of the box through words and images tell a story about a family and community that are sacred, and it is for this reason why we refer to them as sacred boxes. I believe everyone has a story to tell, and every story is sacred.

Over the years, the *cajita* project has taught me that so many of the answers that we seek in becoming complete and “educated people” are located within ourselves and from those foundational sources we have been shaped into who we have become. As an educator who was raised by parents with little formal education, I have come to realize that the veins of personal transformative knowledge are contained in our stories of family, ancestry, and community as articulated in my father’s philosophy of *reparar*. There exists great knowledge and instruction in this fact, and I feel obligated to share this with every student who enters my classroom. With this in mind, I believe that there is *esperanza* (hope) for those who have suffered at the hands of both structured and individualistic oppressive forces in their lives. Our educational systems must embrace and validate the palette of living colors that make up the lives of all women and men regardless of race, gender, class, religion, or sexual orientation.

In reflecting on the *cajita* project in relation to Eliot, he reminds us that we are not alone in our thoughts and actions—that what we knew in innocence is already grounded in experience. The *cajita* project for students embodies the theme of Eliot’s Four Quartets cited above, because it is a process of leading us back to the beginning – a sort of homecoming back to the source that orients our world from where we strive to obtain wholeness.

Borrowing from Eliot and his interpreters, the *cajita* becomes a visual and material story that is enshrined in space and time. Of the multiple experiences of an individual, the *cajita* serves to capture the culmination of these experiences – the end of a journey up to this point in the lives of students where they are able to reflect back and capture the summation of all parts that brings forward the resolution to their self. It represents closure to a cycle of life and history – and closure to a journey that has an end and a beginning.

In conclusion, the most critical and significant thing to remember about the *cajita* project is that all students who enter my classroom enter it with a living palette that must be shared and exposed in an attempt to create community. The classroom is transformed into a space where experiences as well as the expressions of the living colors in their lives are validated and celebrated.

Notes

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