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## ARTICLE

# From Multicultural Students to Intercultural Pedagogy: Creating *Convivencia* in the Classroom

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## ABSTRACT

Creating an effective learning environment in a multicultural classroom requires more than attention to content and bibliography. I had to make the pedagogical move from the primary importance of exegesis to the indispensable need for hermeneutics. And not just any hermeneutical theory; one built on the very diversity I found in the classroom. In a word, I needed to learn to teach *latinamente*. I had to transform from being a teacher to becoming a host, gathering co-learners around the table, and recognizing and valuing the diversity already present.

## KEYWORDS

*convivencia*, hermeneutics of engagement and otherness, intercultural community, *Latinamente*, pedagogy

At the conclusion of my Introduction to the New Testament course, I invite the students to a symposium. They prepare dishes from their ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and I provide the paper products and the ever-important libations. The goal is simple: to create a space wherein these newer students can enjoy commensality, conversation, and conviviality. The more jaded of my colleagues might call this an end of class party. But this is graduate school, so I call it a symposium.

One symposium was of special note. After each student had narrated his or her offering, explaining the tradition behind it or the cultural significance, we began the parade around the buffet table. While we sat in the dining room and marveled at the heretofore unknown talents of our classmates, I was wonderfully aware that we were experiencing a taste of the heavenly banquet. Our Bible is replete with images of food and feasting: Passover lambs, manna in the desert, oil and bread during famine, bitter scrolls eaten by prophets, new wine in old skins, dining with reprobates, multiplying scarce resources to feed the hungry, bread and wine as meal, memory and true presence. How wonderful to be fed and satisfied by God's word and our bread.

But eucharist isn't just about eating. It's also about response. One of the seminarians who is from Vietnam had brought his guitar. He asked to play for the group. Though attentive, he had never spoken up during class. As he played, another Vietnamese seminarian sang a traditional song. He would pause to translate the lyrics and explain the differences among North, central, and South Vietnam. The applause was thunderous. The sound of understanding and appreciation, of connection. The guitar was passed to a Latino lay minister who sang a tribute to the mothers in the room. Two lay women from the Philippines quickly searched a neighboring student's iPad to find the chords for a national Filipino song. A Chinese seminarian sang of freedom and love. Another Vietnamese seminarian stood and sang in English in praise of God. Mexican, Vietnamese, Chinese, Filipino . . . the lyrics and voices filled the room. Beside me, a new student studying for pastoral Ministry in the Archdiocese was absolutely enthralled. She kept saying, "This is the church. This is the church." The spontaneous music fest concluded as a Chinese student intoned an Irish ballad, "You Lift Me UP," and the entire room began to sing. It was as if the prophecy of Isaiah was being fulfilled: "On this mountain the LORD of hosts will provide for all peoples/A feast of rich food and choice wines, juicy, rich food and pure, choice wines" (Isa 25:6).

While that gathering remains an emotional highlight in my teaching career, upon reflection I realized that the sharing of cultures occurred only after the course had ended. I taught a multicultural group of students as if they were all Anglos in my doctoral alma mater. I espoused the tenets of historical critical method, leaving the application to their liturgy and to their pastoral professors. I may have sprinkled my bibliography with international authors, but I didn't take seriously their contribution. I taught the old way to a new church.

And then I experienced an epiphany in—of all places—a faculty seminar. Professor Carmen Nanko-Fernández asked a question of one of the senior systematic theologians. "Why do we hyphenate theologies from other cultures, but when we refer to the dominant theology, we just say, 'theology,' as if it is normative and the rest are derivative?" "Huh," I thought, "that's true. Why do we do that?" I wish I could say that the older, white systematic theologian shared the same response. Instead, what ensued was an *apologia* of biblical proportions. To continue the biblical metaphors, at that moment something like scales fell from my pedagogical lens. I realized that I was teaching a multicultural group of students and I should be engaging an intercultural pedagogy. Thus began my interest in teaching *latinamente*.

Rather than setting my sights on the eschatological banquet, I turned, rather, to the here and now. In other words, I moved from the primary importance of exegesis to the indispensable need for hermeneutics. And not just any hermeneutical theory, but one built on the very diversity I found in the classroom. I had to turn from being teacher to becoming host, gathering co-learners around the table, and recognizing and valuing the diversity already present.

Intercultural community has as its goal "*convivencia*, a living together as community that is predicated upon analysis of the complexity of that living with hopes of living together justly and well" (Nanko-Fernández 2010, xviii). My first step in engaging an intercultural pedagogy was creating *convivencia*, which Latino biblical scholar Jean-Pierre Ruiz notes is "an expression that does not easily translate into English because it is more than mere fellowship" (Ruiz 2015, 113). The second step was setting the table *en conjunto*.

In the Matthean version of the wedding feast, the kingdom of God is compared to a grand invitation which the king sends out to his guests (Matt 22:1-14). When the invited guests fail to appear, the king widens the guest list (Matt 22:9-10). The least likely are now invited to the feast, but as the parable continues, "many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt 22:14). An invitation does not guarantee a seat at the table. In my exploration of interculturality and pedagogy, I have had to elbow my way to the table, so to speak, privileging a particular way of reading that values the perspectives of the other.

The hermeneutical strategy I now use builds on the intercultural criticism espoused by New Testament scholar Fernando Segovia (1995, 59). His "hermeneutics of engagement and otherness" holds in creative tension the contextualized biblical text and the contextualized reader, in order to evaluate the contextualized interpretive results, reception, and aftereffects.

[The hermeneutics of engagement and otherness] opts for humanization and diversity—it resists both dehumanization, any divestiture of all those identity factors that constitute and characterize the reader as reader, and rehumanization, any attempt to force all readers into one and the same particular and contextualized discussion. Finally, it seeks to acknowledge, respect, and engage the other—it opposes any attempt, implicit or explicit, to overwhelm or override the other, to impose a definition upon it, to turn the other into an ‘other.’ (Segovia 1995, 72)

Such a reading strategy upholds diversity as a value, not a stumbling block. Ruiz notes that

Embracing a hermeneutics of engagement and otherness . . . makes it possible to recognize that the diversity of readers in the world *in front of* the text . . . reflects analogous diversity in the world *behind* the text. (Ruiz 2011, 7)

With this hermeneutical lens, the particularity of the text and the particularity of the reader meet across the divide of distance, allowing Scripture to speak to an intercultural community. As students at a Catholic graduate school of theology and ministry, my students need a practical way to create this *convivencia*. But, as Ruiz acknowledged, “There are no recipes for engaging in biblical interpretation *latinamente*, no cookbooks or television programs where the top chefs of this craft share their secrets” (Ruiz 2015, 113).

Taking Ruiz’s comments to heart, I had to start from scratch. In order to read the bible *latinamente*, I developed a reading strategy that builds on the table fellowship metaphor through the hermeneutics of engagement and otherness. The first half of the class session is given over to lecture, while the second is for small group discussion and integration. In the second part of the class, the students address four questions, pausing to read and reread the text under study at the beginning of each question.

1. Who’s at the Table?
2. What’s on the Table?
3. Where is the Table?
4. Are we all nourished?

First, “Who’s at the table?” attends to agency. Are those with whom we read sitting at the adult table or relegated to the kid’s table? As Nanko-Fernández rightly notes about agency:

Representation based on undifferentiated sameness or uncritical accompaniment results in this case in a profound loss of agency for those communities already under-represented in the leadership of the church and in ministry on all levels. (2010, 43)

One way to assure that we are all equal subjects—including the biblical text—is to attend to: the reader’s social location and the text’s social location.

Each individual at the table is invited (though not compelled) to describe their social location, or as Gittins’ suggests, one’s social geography.

People do not simply inhabit the world—they live in a particular world, where certain features like this mountain, this lake, this ocean, or this forest have a particular importance in their lives. (2015, 67)

The Maori of Aotearoa (New Zealand) include in their personal introduction the name of their mountain, river/lake/sea, founding ancestor, tribe, marae (meeting place), home location, parents, and finally their name. Ask a Chicagoan where they live and they will most often name their parish, even if they are not Catholic! Inviting those around the table to introduce themselves recognizes diversity and values it. Though the students are in the same group every week, they nonetheless “introduce” themselves each time they gather, recognizing that our social location is never stagnant.

The text's social location is another way of asking "What is the information about the Scripture that we need in order to meet it on its terms?" The students are to think of the biblical passage itself as an invited guest to the table, an other we know little about. It did not originate in our time, culture, or language. Its worldview is foreign to today's readers. But just because its origin is ancient, doesn't mean that it doesn't have meaning for us today. That meaning must emerge in dialogue with our understanding of ourselves and the needs of our community. Here the students bring what they have learned from the lecture and their own reading to the table.

Second, "What's on the table?" recognizes the plurality of traditions or cultural scripts that are condiments, utensils, placemats, and serving platters allowing us to eat with ease and enjoyment. I was in Honduras not long ago, and on every table at every meal we had a variety of "salsas." Coming from the bland North where ketchup is both a vegetable and a seasoning, I didn't quite know what to do with this array of sauces. Only by trial and error did I discover what enhanced the food's flavor and what seared my lips like hot coals. Just as too much salt can be harmful, not everything on our table serves our nutritional needs. An interesting question in an intercultural gathering is who decides which cultural expression is acceptable and which is taboo.

Our next step is a practical one: "Where is the table?" Where is the locus of our engagement with the text? Since the students are learning this methodology to use in their own ministerial settings this question has special relevance. Where they gather matters. And when they gather matters. The expectations of small group discussions in a classroom are very different than the expectations of a basic ecclesial community. Likewise, what is the stuff of daily lived experience, *lo cotidiano*, that surrounds us as we read and study our Scripture? As María Pilar Aquino notes, "active paradigms, traditions, and categories supporting the social construction of reality reside and operate in the daily life of people" (Aquino 1999, 38). In other words, our biblical study should not be divorced from our lived reality.

Finally, we conclude our study with the most important question, "Are we all nourished?" After we have fed on the Word of God, are we strengthened? Empowered? Challenged? Does our reading together feed us individually and as community? Or was this simply a snack. A little renewed boost of energy but nothing substantial. The question that the students conclude with is "Now what?" As the letter of James admonishes us: "be doers of the word, and not merely hearers" (James 1:22). To be active doers of God's word is to be attentive listeners, yes. But it is also to be avid participants. My students learn that studying Scripture is not a spectator sport.

Teaching *latinamente* has not only altered my pedagogy, it has had a profound effect on my students, many of whom have never had their own theologies valued. "Contextual theologies, like those that arise from the reflections of Latin@ theologians, unmask claims of those who confuse their particularity from the norm" (Nanko-Fernández 2010, 44). Engaging an intercultural hermeneutic transforms a multicultural classroom into a community of *convivencia*, a true foretaste of that heavenly banquet.

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