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# From Porciones to Colonias: Curriculum Development in K-12 Education--Methodology and Program Development

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## *FIVE*

### **From Porciones to Colonias: Curriculum Development in K-12 Education— Methodology and Program Development**

Edna C. Alfaro, Margaret Dorsey, Sonia Hernandez  
and Russell K. Skowronek

The 2012 National Endowment for the Humanities- sponsored “From Porciones to Colonias: Inserting the “Hispanic” in a Hispanic Serving Institution through Curriculum Innovation” brought together faculty at the largest Hispanic Serving Institution in Texas, the University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA), and public school teachers to create place-based curriculum. Using the natural landscape and cultural history of one of the most dynamic borderlands in the world as the main classroom laboratory, faculty housed in the CHAPS program (Community Historical Archaeology Project with Schools) challenged elementary, middle, and high school teachers in the sciences, social sciences and humanities to create in their students historically literate citizens who are aware of their local cultural and natural history. The following briefly encapsulates the conducted activities.

#### *The Workshop*

The workshop consisted of a series of lectures, films, and presentations, hands-on learning opportunities, and field trips. These were designed to expose the participants to a broad swath of the prehistory and history of the lower Rio Grande valley and to the methodologies and technologies used by scholars in anthropology, archaeology, geography and history. From these activities the participants were expected to develop place-based class plans derived from these activities. A synopsis of the workshop follows.

### *Activity—Oral History*

Dr. Margaret Dorsey directed an Oral History workshop on ethical and technical practices in ethnographic interviewing. This exercise provided participants with hands-on experience conducting interviews, collecting informed consent and deed of gift forms and using the Border Studies Archive's audio and video equipment. Participants saw the documentary film *Border Bandits* which demonstrates the significance of oral narrative in providing the "unwritten" history of the borderlands. The film also gave students a glimpse at the ways in which their audio and video footage could be used to craft a documentary film.

Later, Dorsey led a series of discussions centered on Américo Paredes' seminal work titled, "On Ethnographic Fieldwork Among Minority Groups." This drew the participants' attention to the "performance-based" approach or sociolinguistic approach to ethnography. The group discussed the need to provide interpretation of their interview in their field notes as well as the significance of not taking utterances literally, as Paredes shows many sociologists and a few anthropologists do in his article. This discussion included reminding students of the need to provide explanation of the use of metaphor, joking and other literary devices from the field recording in their field notes or the interview transcription itself.

Participants spent parts of the time at the computer lab working on their field notes and transcription. Approximately 90% of the participants had, prior to this workshop, no experience with ethnography, their success was notable as all of them completed this exercise and deposited their transcriptions and recordings in the Border Studies Archive.

### *Activity—Porción Research and History of the Rio Grande Valley*

NEH workshop participants focused on several themes for the history portion of the workshop. Dr. Sonia Hernandez provided an overview of the history of the Rio Grande Valley beginning with the founding of Nuevo Santander. Selected readings on the land, family, and cultural history of the region were incorporated into the lecture. Participants also discussed these outside readings. Teacher participants then visited the Hidalgo County Courthouse land records department. Land records are an important tool for understanding how property changes through time. The participants conducted land searches and discovered the original title holder of their respective properties. They then traced the history of particular *porciones* (land grants allotted by the King of Spain, ca. 1750) and identified major transformations that took place. Participants researched land title deeds/abstracts as well as maps of *porciones* and their respective present-day *colonias* or subdivisions. The various land transactions as well as the changing property boundaries were located on *porciones* maps given to the teacher participants.

Teacher participants also visited the Lower Rio Grande Valley Special Collections in the University of Texas—Pan American library. Librarian Janette Garcia provided an overview of the materials related to history of the region. Participants used census records, genealogical documents, newspapers as well as other documents related to their respective properties to complete their final reports. The final reports of the participants included a narrative based on these land transactions as well as a brief discussion of historical events in the area.

### *Activity—Human Geography*

Participants visited the Museum of South Texas History in Edinburg, Texas. This “world class” facility helped connect them to their rich cultural past. The visit, led by Dr. Lisa Adam, a geographer and Curator at the museum, pointed out how environment shaped the human responses to the region and how humans, in-turn, shaped their environment. These human aspects were the chronological time markers for understanding how the Rio Grande River and the natural landscape have changed through time. Participants were given and watched the short film, “La Colonización del Nuevo Santander: 1748-1767,” developed by the museum. There are very few such focused films on the early history of the valley. This will make a welcome addition to the participants’ teaching aids.

### *Activity- Archaeological Insights into Prehistory and History*

Led by Dr. Russell Skowronek this section explored the nature of archaeology, the Native Peoples of Texas with special emphasis on south Texas, and the nature of the Spanish colonial occupation of the area. Participants were provided with and watched the NPS film “Gente de Razón-People of the Mission,” which gave them insights into the survival of Native peoples in the region. Consideration was given to how archaeological sites are formed and found. The workshop included a discussion of cultural and natural site formation processes and how these can play a role in the preservation of sites. Following that a presentation on archaeological reconnaissance—systematic attempt to find and locate spatially sites. It was noted that there are both conspicuous and inconspicuous sites. The former have not been “lost” while the latter may be found through literature searches, that is the use of documents and maps, by speaking with farmers and collectors (oral history), or through archaeological research including pedestrian surveys or remote sensing. Participants also learned how aerial and satellite imagery have been used by archaeologists to identify archaeological sites. Each participant was provided with a projectile point guide for south Texas developed by the CHAPS Program. Next, they participated in a number of hands-on exercises using a cross-section of artifacts.

### *Activity—Palo Alto Battlefield*

The class visited Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic Site in Cameron County and the associated sites of Fort Brown and Resaca de La Palma battlefields all associated with the Mexican-American War and dating to May of 1846. There the participants were provided with and watched the orientation film “War on the Rio Grande.” Here the participants saw first-hand how technology plays a role in the interpretation and preservation of this, the site where the Mexican-American War began. NPS Archaeologist, Rolando Garza led the group around the site and discussed the battlefield archaeological investigations which have been conducted using aerial photographs, ground penetrating radar, soil resistivity, metal detectors and the mapping using GPS. Later, NPS Ranger and Interpreter Karen Weaver described opportunities for schools to obtain, free of charge, “traveling trunks” and a visit from the Rangers. This activity stimulated much discussion and was actively integrated into the fifth grade science curriculum developed by Ruby Aguilar.

### *Activity—Case Study of Place-Based Learning—St. Joseph Catholic School*

In a brief program Maria Lagorio Gritz of St. Joseph Catholic School in Edinburg, Texas shared her experiences working with the CHAPS Program. As a Social Studies teacher for grades five through eight she challenged her students to the following questions.

- How did your ancestors get to Texas?
- How did they support themselves financially?
- What tools did they use that we do not use today?

While these are questions that we in the field of humanities have considered, the reality is that most middle school students have yet to ponder the answers to these questions. In doing so, they as a classroom community engaged in the process of documenting history and capturing the fleeting voices of the Rio Grande Valley.

The short-term goals of her project were many. She hoped to develop historical perspective, to compare and contrast students’ and subjects’ lives, to discover potential archaeological sites, to improve students’ interviewing and writing skills, and to link oral histories to curriculum. In the long-term, she hoped to enhance archaeological interest, encourage the pursuit of history-related studies, spread awareness of the CHAPS Program, and develop an in-depth archaeological knowledge of the Rio Grande Valley. Most of all, she wanted to give the students the opportunity to get to know their ancestors on a deeper level, to appreciate the sacrifices made for future generations, and to feel a personal connection to the past that may fuel an interest in an historical career in the future. Five classes of student, totaling about ninety-five students, conducted interviews of older family members.

The students' post-interview reflections showed that many of the goals we had outlined in the beginning had been accomplished. In these reflections, her students reported an increased interest in the past, a sense of continuity throughout time despite generational differences, and an altered attitude toward the subject of their interviews. One student stated, "It made me realize that my grandparents worked hard all through their life and that hard work does pay off."

### *Activity- Pedagogical Innovation, Identification of Environment and Community Resources, Creating Classroom Resources*

The teacher workshop was guided by two important curriculum goals. (1) A place-based curriculum approach was utilized in order to expose participating teachers to the local community and environmental resources. (2) Through exposure to the historical content covered in the proposed workshop, we sought to foster an increased representation of Hispanics in the curriculum. To aid in the creation of place-based lesson plans, teachers attended a workshop that described the objectives of place-based education (e.g., unites curriculum with local experiences, views the local community as a resource, and connects schools with communities), provided examples of place-based curriculums, and described the effectiveness of place-based learning. For example, in addition to fostering academic success of students, place-based curriculum workshops have been shown to be significantly and positively related to teachers' confidence levels (Meichtry & Smith, 2007).

After discussing place-based curriculum, teachers were presented with information about adolescent development and the important task of identity formation and exploration by Dr. Edna Alfaro. Combined with the assigned reading, this part of the workshop provided an overview of the impact that representing the Hispanic culture and people in the curriculum has on Hispanic students.

At the conclusion of this workshop teachers were given the opportunity to create their lesson plans and test them during the 2012-2013 academic year. Each lesson plan contained the following sections, which were adapted from the Edsitement website: 1. Brief Introduction to Lesson Plan, 2. Guiding Questions, 3. Learning Objectives, 4. Detailed Background, 5. Preparation Instructions, 6. Lesson Activities, 7. Assessment, 8. Skills that Will be Targeted, 9. Resources (links for students, lists of readings, media).

### *Going beyond the Workshop*

In March of 2013 the teacher participants shared their lesson plans and their classroom

observations of their students at a symposium titled, “From *Porciones* to *Colonias*, Place-based learning in K-12 Curriculum.” This was part of the larger campus activities associated with FESTIBA (Festival of International Books & Arts).

Following the symposium the members of the CHAPS Program met with the Social Studies Coordinator for Social Studies –Project PASST Director, from the office of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment with Region One. “Region One Educational Service Center is part of a state-wide system of 20 regional education service centers created by the 59th Texas Legislature to assist school districts across the state in improving student performance in each region of the system; enable school districts to operate more efficiently and economically; and implement initiatives assigned by the legislature of commissioner. Located in South Texas on the United States/Mexico border, Region One ESC serves 37 school districts and 10 charter school systems in the seven county areas of Cameron County, Hidalgo County, Jim Hogg County, Starr County, Webb County, Willacy County, and Zapata County.”

At this and a subsequent meeting with Region One Social Studies Coordinators it was noted that teachers were challenged in formulating engaging curriculum due to a lack of source materials. This in turn led to low student recall during testing. They learned that the teachers who were involved the NEH workshop “From *Porciones* to *Colonias*” using place-based learning model approach created their own resources by using their students to produce primary sources by conducting oral history interviews with family elders and collecting old photographs, artifacts and documents, and then recording their findings into a source that was accessible to other students and teachers. They saw that when a student takes ownership of producing primary sources such as a family history, land tenure chronology, music, and songs referring to local circumstances, a “*corrido*” for example, the same students tend to recall and remember information more readily because of their personal involvement in creating valuable local resources.

As the reader will find these teachers and their students is in fact living proof of Masfield’s observation “the days that make us happy make us wise.”