Globethics Repository

Globethics

Teaching and Practice

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see https://www.globethics.net. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Strain, Charles R., Ph.D.
Publisher	Rabbi Myer and Dorothy Kripke Center for the Study of Religion and Society
Rights	Creative Commons Copyright (CC 2.5)
Download date	2026-11-16 21:09:31
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/180268

Journal of Religion & Society Volume 2 (2000)

ISSN 1522-5658

Teaching and Practice

Experiential Education and the Transformation of Liberation Theology

Charles R. Strain, DePaul University

Abstract

"Is any of this real?" This question by a student in my Liberation Theology course took me aback because I had made strenuous efforts to make the course as concrete as possible by using documentary films, novels, and ethnographic studies of Christian base communities in Latin America. But the student had a point. The course lacked rootedness in the reality of the students' own experiences. This essay focuses upon three efforts that I have made over the past four years to transform the teaching of liberation theology. I will examine the development of a follow-up study trip to the Sonora, Mexico/Arizona borderlands to examine the social and economic conditions fostered by global economic forces. Second, I will look at the transformation of the Liberation Theology course itself into a "service learning" course. Finally, I will analyze the use of a HyperNews electronic discussion group through which the students themselves were able to take over the teaching and practice of the course.

Finding Reality

> A few years back a bunch of us were sitting around talking about California's new legislation on illegal aliens. We were tossing around ideas about right and wrong, fair and unfair, and one of my friends broke in. "My God, listen to how you sound! You are talking about borders keeping people out, who deserves emergency medical care, and education, and is there enough to go around. Can you hear how you sound?" . . .
>
> Ever since that day, I think, "How do I sound, what am I saying?" I listen for the catch phrases "I'm sorry, but . . . Maybe this sounds insensitive, but . . . Maybe this is selfish, but . . ." And I've learned, if it sounds that way, it is.[1]

[1] For years I have been trying to root the study of liberation theology in an examination of the lives and struggles of the Latin America communities that first generated this form of theological reflection. I have found no completely successful way of connecting North American students to contexts far removed from their experiences. We have viewed documentary films of base communities in Brazil and the popular film, "Romero." I selected Manlio Argueta's novel, *One Day of Life*, because it explores, more compellingly than any other work I know, the subtle

[1] Megan Fitzgerald, "The Language of Fear," in *In the Borderlands/En La Frontera* (quoted with permission). My thanks go to all of these students who have so enthusiastically participated in these experiments in experiential education and who have taught me how to hope again. I especially want to thank Christine Grosso, Joe Kinsella, Anthony Burton, Martin Ryan, Lisa Sciolaro, Sara Schmitt, Jeff Chakoian, Anthony Chou, Kevin Coval, Sean Dunn, Jeff Eckrosh, Chris Ferrantelli, Megan Fitzgerald, Donna Goldman, Melissa Haeffner, Andrew Hannigan, Laura Hansen, Catherine Jefcoat, Chris Jerin, Ryan Long, Elizabeth McCormack, Chris McGuire, Paul Nersesian, Kevin Murphy, Edgar Ramirez, Travis Rejman, Marcia Roa, Rebecca Ryan, Landi Smith, Sarah Sypniewski, Kristen Tobey and my colleague Michael Budde. Thanks to Sr. Jane Gerard for assistance in preparing this manuscript. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, November, 1999.

dynamics of conscientization in the life of a peasant woman. Long ago, I shifted from a heavy emphasis on the works of leading Latin American theologians and, instead, worked with ethnographic and sociological studies of base communities struggling to find their own voice, such as Daniel Levine's *Popular Voices in Latin American Catholicism.* More recently, we have read Nancy Scheper-Hughes' *Death Without Weeping* to understand the way everyday violence plagues the lives of urban Brazilians.

[2] Each of these efforts has helped some students to recognize the tangled web that links their lives with Latin American communities to the benefit of a few and the misery of many. Yet the question asked by one student, "Is any of this real?" characterizes the sense of many students that, at best, they are looking *at* their fellow human beings through a glass darkly.

[3] This essay focuses upon three efforts that I have made over the past four years to transform the teaching of liberation theology. First, I will examine the development of a linkage between the Liberation Theology course and a follow-up study trip to the Sonora, Mexico/Arizona borderlands to examine the social and ecological conditions fostered by global economic forces. Second, I will look at the transformation of the Liberation Theology course itself into a "service learning" course. Finally, I will analyze the use of a HyperNews electronic threaded discussion group through which the students themselves were able to take over the teaching and practice of the course.

Life on the Border

> if we could remember
> we are siblings
> no borders would exist
>
> but now steel plate gulf war abundance
> hangs infrared surveillance spy cameras
> between our embrace,
> we are american.
> you are mexican.
> we are rich.
> you are poor.
> you are not me.
> our borders are definite.
>
> church gates, great walls, nation-states
> are guarded with Israeli ammunition, Russian AK's and capitalist dollars
> defending the right to life, liberty and justice -
> for just us.[2]

[4] My first step in transforming the course occurred when I connected in 1994 with BorderLinks, a non-profit educational organization in Nogales, Sonora and Tucson, Arizona. An outgrowth of the Sanctuary movement in Tucson, BorderLinks conducts programs for church groups, ecological activists, labor unions, seminary and college students, and others who wish to examine the one place on the globe where the industrialized world directly collides with the Third World.[3] Working with BorderLinks, I shaped an inexpensive ten-day study trip where

[2] Kevin Coval, "If We Could Remember," in *In the Borderlands/En La Frontera* (quoted with permission).

[3] BorderLinks can be reached by e-mail at:program@borderlinks.org. Its address is 710 E. Speedway, Tucson, AZ 88719.

students would live with families in the *colonias* surrounding Nogales, visit the *maquiladora* (assembly plants) scattered along the border, hold discussions with members of the Sanctuary movement as they charted a course for their movement in the 1990s, and discuss border conditions with members of Christian base communities, public officials, journalists, ecological and labor activists, and the Border Patrol.[4]

[5] Between one-third and one-half of the students in sections of the Liberation Theology course have also taken the BorderLinks study trip. Liberation theology provides the students with the theoretical framework to understand the border as the crucible of globalization, the place where you are caught up in its swirl of contradictions. They come to the border ready to think systemically. The course also creates a horizon of liberation within which our questions of and discussions with those who accept the processes of globalization and the chaos of life along the border as fated realities become strikingly charged. Conversely the sequencing of the Liberation Theology course and the study trip means that I give far more attention in liberation theology to the forms of structural violence characteristic of the last ten years rather than to the patterns of state terrorism of the decade of the 1980s.

[6] Most importantly, the students who have taken the trip have found an anchorage in their own experience for understanding global poverty. They internalized a visceral sense of both the immensity of the everyday violence that confronts all of the border dwellers and of the spiritual strength of the base community members who persist in their struggles against that violence. Key themes in our Liberation Theology course retroactively caught fire with these students when we saw them enacted along the border. For example, one of our trip leaders on two occasions was Cecilia Guzman, a lifetime resident of Nogales, Sonora who worked for years as a pastoral leader until forced out of her position by a conservative pastor. Cecilia also has been a social worker with a long term involvement in the network of Nogales´ social agencies. Now she works on both sides of the border educating North Americans and Mexicans alike. We learned much more about an unassuming, faith-based persistence in working for change from Cecelia than we ever did from the often inflated claims made in the theological literature on behalf of base communities. When we met with Groupa Beta, an elite cadre of Mexican police trained by the Border Patrol and ostensibly designed to counter corruption of the border, many students raised concerns about news reports of police brutality on both sides of the border. Their questions were met with a polished PR response intended to exonerate Groupa Beta of all culpability. After we left our meeting, Cecilia said quietly that we were lied to, that she herself, in her work with street kids living a chaotic life in the tunnels under the border, had seen the physical marks of Groupa Beta's handiwork. Cecilia who has worked with base communities all along the Arizona/Sonora border offered no utopian pronouncements, just the record of a life of commitment lived with unassuming integrity. No wonder that student after student commented in their journals that when they think of liberation theology, they think of Cecilia.

[7] Another focus of the Liberation Theology course has been trying to disentangle the relationship of liberation theology to Evangelical Christians from the stereotypical presentations of one side or the other. These discussions about the conflicts between Catholic base communities and Evangelicals took on added weight when we witnessed the "highjacking" of a base community Bible discussion by Evangelical prisoner-witnesses inside a Mexican prison.

[4] For an introduction to conditions in the *maquiladora* that is relevant to the issues raised in a Liberation Theology course, see Pena.

This experience appeared to us to be a blind collision with neither side remotely comprehending the other. But it did bring home to us the divergent strengths of these movements all too frequently locked in opposition.[5]

[8] Perhaps the biggest change brought about by connecting the Liberation Theology course to the BorderLinks trip has been in me. I said after I returned from my first trip that I had expected to learn a great deal about the border and even something about liberation theology but I did not expect to learn how to teach. In part, this learning process involved the borrowing of techniques of reflection from BorderLinks trip-leaders to turn often overwhelming personal experiences into powerful learning events. But my own transformation went further. Going back again and again to the same place, living and talking with many of the same people as they struggle to keep their families intact, experiencing the ways, subtle and dramatic, in which globalization undermines daily family life - the sick children all over the *colonia* as winter sets in, the sullen teenager hacking away at a piece of furniture in his home with a butcher's knife, an overworked father's hacking cough - burned away all abstract moral reasoning far more effectively than any reading of Carol Gilligan.[6] I no longer obsess about whether I am turning the "academic" study of one form of theology into a forced conversion process. The border with all of its complexities demands my and my students' full intelligence. The border and its people elicit our deep passion and compassion.

Service Learning and The Practice of Liberation

> and the most real moment is stepping outside.
>
> How much weight do you think there could be

[5] For an ethnographic treatment that compares liberation theology's base communities with the work of Evangelical, largely Pentecostal, communities, I have found the work of John Burdick most useful.

[6] Gilligan's ethic of care seeks to move beyond abstract notions of justice to examine the social responsibilities born of relationships. One of the aims of a BorderLinks trip is to develop an awareness of the relationship between the conditions of poverty in Nogales, Sonora and the comparative affluence of most North Americans. In engaged Buddhist terminology which I find helpful in elucidating the concepts of liberation theology, affluence, and poverty "dependently coarise" in an era of global production and consumption: "You are as you are because I am as I am." See further Nhat Hahn, 35-36, 61-69.

The dependent coarising is literal not metaphorical. In 1996 the mother of the family with whom I stayed took off a day of work to take her infant daughter, sick with bronchitis, to the local free clinic. The lines were too long and the daughter was not treated. But the woman lost her bonus worth about one-third of her $45.00 weekly wage. She works in a factory which produces virtually all of the garage door openers sold by Sears. Each snowy Chicago evening when I click the garage door open I think about the direct connection between my comfort and that child's untreated sickness.

The hacking cough of the older worker is directly related to the ecological havoc that a massive influx of people and over 100 *maquiladora* (Nogales grew from a town of 50,000 to a city of over 350,000 in a space of 20-30 years) wreaks on a desert terrain. Dust plumes the city. The *maquiladora* add to the havoc by dumping their toxic wastes in open landfills and in the Nogales wash although they are required by international treaties to return all waste to the U.S. for disposal. In this case the evasion of international laws by American-owned companies directly affects the well being of American citizens. Nogales, Arizona which is downwind and down stream from its Mexican sister city has, according to border ecological activists and public health officials, the highest rates of lupus in the industrialized world. I could go on. Clothes, shoes, Samsonite luggage, electrical components in the computer which prepares this article, the surgical drapes that protect my sister undergoing a critical operation - items important to my family's well being are produced by people whom I have known and lived with whose wages at less than one dollar per hour do not allow them to escape from the squalor of the *colonia.*

in one instant (crushing-guilt-instant) -
the certain knowledge of
the possibility that you won't change
your life having seen what you've seen
- what do you do? - ?

Just enough
is always
not enough.[7]

[9] A study trip to Nogales, however, was never possible for more than half of the students in the Liberation Theology class. So, I have looked for ways to provide all of the students with an experiential touchstone. I turned to service learning because it was part of my University's renewed commitment to social engagement. But, more importantly, I did so because it is a pedagogy that intentionally brings together theory and practice. Students engaged in some academic inquiry are placed in community-based social agencies and given responsibilities that fit, so far as possible, with the content of the course. Not only do students perform regular service over the course of the semester but classes are structured so that students have the opportunity to reflect together on their service involvement. Part of the task of the teacher is to coax the students into linking theory and practice. In my Liberation Theology course the large majority of students were involved in teaching English as a Second Language, and in some cases citizenship training and basic computer-skills classes, in a storefront center sponsored by the Heartland Alliance in a Latino/a neighborhood of Chicago. Just as significantly the nature of the course demands a connection with actual social engagement. Trying to teach this course simply within the walls of the academy had become for me something in the nature of directing a silent film on the life of Mozart.

[10] When I began the process of turning the course into a service learning course, the question, "Is any of this real?" changed. Students never questioned the *reality* of their service context, but they began to question many other things: "What does service have to do with liberation? Does it aid or impede it?" "What is liberation anyhow? What do these utopian dreams have to do with the daily struggles of the people I serve?"[8] "What are the limits of charitable actions?" "What are the limits of action in pursuit of social justice?" And on and on. The course became "real" because the questions - each one of them directly related to the core issues of the course - arose out of an actual struggle on the part of the students to learn while serving.

[11] Look, for example, at the range of issues represented in a single, opening journal entry by a student working on a Salvation Army food distribution project.

> We handed out sandwiches and apples and juice to ANYONE who came up to the van. We fed prostitutes, pimps, kids, mechanics, moms, grandmas, homeless guys, crack addicts, and drug dealers. Sometimes people would say thanks and seem really grateful and sometimes they would

[7] Kristen Tobey, Untitled in *In the Borderlands/En La Frontera* (quoted with permission).

[8] When I have brought up this question to an audience that included liberation theologians and ethicists, I have been met with consternation. The utopian aspiration is so central to the way we think that the idea that it could be counterproductive in some circumstances is unacceptable. Yet my students, working closely with Spanish-speaking immigrants and not necessarily sharing my inbred academic frameworks, recognize that utopian formulations can obscure the immediate needs that preoccupy the people they seek to serve. The urgency of structural transformation eclipses the urgency of daily survival. For a classical formulation of the relationship of "faith, utopia and political action," see Gutierrez. For a critique of liberation theology which mirrors these students' doubts, see Burdick.

> get really mad and swear at us when we didn't give them 2 or 3 sandwiches. It was hard work. After 4+ hours, I was exhausted and found myself looking forward to getting home.
>
> I don't know. I don't know about this. I don't think I like this type of community service. It didn't feel good. Well, it felt good to give the kids food knowing that they probably don't have food at home. But no one's life was changed. No one's situation was changed. Perhaps, our feeding program helps people to not change their situation. It's just no[t] enough, giving people something to eat, then driving away. I'm not sure what I think.
>
> I also feel distinctly separate from the people that come to the van. THEY come to OUR van and WE give THEM food. Then THEY go away and WE go away. We've all got a sense of US and THEM and I don't know how to even begin to go about breaking that down. Sometimes there was casual conversation between us. Sometimes there was hostile conversation. But there was never meaningful conversation. I had hoped to walk away from my first night out feeling energized and excited and eager for more. I'm none of those things. . .
>
> At first, I thought any changes that will take place on the south side must come from public policy. . . There is a new one underway I just learned about from my public policy friend. He told me the area where the feeding program runs has been labeled an official empowerment zone. This means that millions of dollars will be poured into the south side and community members and business owners in the community decide where it will go and what it will be used for. I was skeptical when I heard this because so many similar programs have failed, precisely because they do not attack the real issue, which I believe is racism. I'm seeing its effects first hand. And experiencing racism within myself as I try not to see each person that approaches our van as a crack addict. But, it looks to me like crack addiction on the south side is just another branch of the racism tree.

The limits and ambiguity of charity. Questions about the "deserving versus underserving" poor and the awareness of how those questions are rooted in a history of racism. Charitable service versus altering social structures. The limits of public policies and projects in a society warped by racism. Doing something *for* and *to* others versus creating meaningful bonds that transcend class and race boundaries. Just to get students to recognize this tangle of issues and their interconnection ordinarily was the labor of the entire course. Yet here they were, passionately articulated, the fruit of a single night of service.

[12] What transformed the Liberation Theology course was not simply that the students were able to *do* something, to apply their skills to real problems. They were asked to engage in a process of transformation which took place over time and which demanded both internal and external change. The students I taught confronted themselves as much as they questioned their social context; they challenged their own level of commitment to lasting change as much as they did the more utopian elements of the course's theoretical framework. A journal entry by a second student whose service was teaching an ESL class provides a glimpse of this transformation:

> Melissa and I taught together again. I think that we are a really nice balance, although I think she might get frustrated with me at times. Today she forced me to teach the class. I think she was tired of taking the initiative and feeling like she was doing all of the work. Which is not what I thought I was doing, but it was that whole scared to take charge and lead thing. Which is funny because in other situations, I have no problem being the leader. I think it's because this is an environment in which I feel like a real novice. But the more I keep teaching the more I am realizing that it is a privilege to be in an environment in which everyone speaks my language and the majority of which have my culture. The reason this ESL class feels so risky is because it is not an environment in which I move. They have to enter my environment (that of dominant English-speaking culture, and by extension Anglo, middle class, etc.) just about everyday, but I never have to enter their environment.
>
> So I'm changing the way I look at this class. I am no longer looking at it like it is an assignment . . . but like it is a responsibility. It [is] a personal responsibility of mine to enter environments which

> I do not have to. It is my responsibility as a white, English speaking person, to have contact with those that do not speak English. This is a concrete way of making my personal commitment to decentering whiteness a part of my everyday life. By not moving in a world that is all white and all English speaking, I am crossing language border and cultural borders. . . As much [as] our "Liberation Theology" class has raked ESL through the coals, I think that is a really awesome thing.

[13] The service context demanded of these students that they engage in a *practice*. Alasdair MacIntyre and socially-engaged Buddhists, among others, have developed sophisticated understandings of practice which liberation theologians might well use. For our purposes, any coherent set of actions which flow from an internalized value framework and not merely from instrumental goals, which impose a discipline upon the self, and link interdependently inner and outer transformation may be called a practice.[9]

> A monk asked Dong-shan: "Is there a practice for people to follow?" Dong-shan answered: "When you become a real person, there is such a practice" (Snyder: 185).

Gary Snyder's version of a traditional Zen aphorism conveys succinctly the innermost trajectory of this student's struggle. By sticking to a difficult task she a) shifted her moral focus from an externally imposed obligation (class assignment) to an internally imposed responsibility ("my personal commitment to decentering whiteness"), b) recognized that the key obstacle to teaching well was less her relative lack of skill than her own ego and went to work on both and c) engaged in a pattern of self-transcending action for the sake of both herself and others ("crossing language and cultural borders").

[14] This struggle is also linked with the narratives of Columbian and Venezuelan peasants that have perplexed virtually all of my students in every section of the Liberation Theology class that I have taught in the past eight years. In case after case Daniel Levine shows how ordinary peasants simultaneously became literate and aware of how oppression has been constructed and enacted in their lives. Nurtured by base communities, they emerged as local leaders. While these personal transformations have been profound, a clear-sighted analysis of Columbian and Venezuelan social context would conclude that no dramatic change has occurred or if it has, it has been for the worse. And yet as one Venezuelan concludes, "I have had an historic life" (Levine: 272-313, 363).

[15] It is this simple declaration that has puzzled my students. It has been our collective koan. As one who came of age as a minor participant in the civil rights movement, I know in my bones what it means. My students do not. The ameliorative power of personal involvement appears self-evident but the power of the self-in-community to effect historical change seems utterly illusory. In many cases the service involvement remained at the level of interpersonal amelioration; in a few, especially when the service was held in tension with more overtly political involvements, a shift to a new level took place.

> I want to write about my experiences this weekend at the School of the Americas vigil in Georgia . . . I found myself thinking on several occasions throughout the weekend, "I am leading an historic life," which again got me thinking about what it means to lead an historic life. All I was doing, after all, was standing somewhere the federal government says I can't be. I've done this a number of times before but the "historic life" thing never struck me. This class has caused me to think a

[9] For the contemporary, classic Western conception of practice, see MacIntyre. On the connection in the Buddhist context of inner and outer transformation, see Thurman. On socially-engaged Buddhism's concept of a practice, see Kraft.

> great deal about action vs. presence - how are they different, how are they similar, which is more effective, etc. This weekend I made the connection between presence and solidarity, which I don't think is as inherent between action and solidarity. To me, teaching ESL has been about action, and I've come to the conclusion that I'm simply more comfortable with presence-as-action. Here, solidarity is implicit, and I believe that solidarity is key to liberation. Indeed, considering the conversion to the neighbor and the creation of utopia, solidarity may be synonymous with liberation, at least on some level. The chance to create that with 7000 other people was amazing. However, perhaps it resonates with me more simply because it's so much more dramatic? I probably need to work a lot harder on creating solidarity where it's not ready-made: if the fact that I go home to Lincoln Park each week after ESL means that solidarity is not implicit, perhaps that means I need to work harder to establish it.

The way in which the classic themes of liberation theologies are alive in this student's experience needs no commentary. If liberation theology as a subject and, for that matter, Religious Studies as a field, have something distinctive to offer, it is this sense of the subtle dynamics of genuine transformation and an awareness of its paradoxes.

[16] All proponents of service learning adamantly insist that the fundamental reason for introducing a service component into a course is that it improves learning (Eyler and Giles). I discovered that my students think more clearly about religiously-motivated change when they themselves are engaged in a practice. So let me end this section with one student's very astute observation about the complexities and ambiguities of social engagement.

> Since the beginning of this service learning experience, I've been having a good deal of internal conflict about our service work as perpetuation of unjust social structures - despite the fun I may be having in class with the ESL students. I cringe when I hear the citizenship teacher in the cubicle next to mine speaking about freedom of religion and the right to peaceful assembly. I've been feeling pretty uneasy about what we're doing. I just received in the mail, however, a bookmark from a friend on which is written a number of scriptural passages from various religious traditions, all of which express the sentiment of "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." It seems as though every major tradition includes this concept somewhere within its body of teachings. I related this to Gutierrez' conversion to the neighbor and felt a little better for about ten minutes thinking that we're putting this into practice at El Centro, but then I again started to think about the inherent contradictions in a "conversion to the neighbor" that involves forced conversion to a foreign and quite less-than-ideal culture. The Golden Rule can be applied on more than one level which may not necessarily be compatible - do we "do unto others" by meeting their needs (or attempt to do so) on a very basic service level? Or do we "do unto others" by refusing to operate within contexts of oppression? If I found myself in a situation in which I had to learn a foreign language, I'd surely want someone to volunteer some time to help me out, but I'd also want someone to recognize injustices and challenge them. Can those be reconciled? I think reconciliation can be achieved if we're able to keep the facets of our praxis - which (in my case, at least) on one hand says "serve" and on the other hand says "resist" - in their appropriate contexts. Fundamentally, the people at El Centro are asking for our help. If I'm truly responding to their needs instead of placing my own needs onto their context, all I can do is meet the needs which they ask for me to meet - that's what I would want someone to do for me. Perhaps that brings it back to Gutierrez' discussion of the three levels (or dimensions) of liberation - meeting basic needs is one dimension, opposing structural dimension is another. When these two can coexist, when the Golden Rule can be applied simultaneously on both levels, we achieve true liberation.

In this student's comments we trace a full circle from critical reflection on practice back to critical reflections on theory in light of that practice.

Liberation Pedagogy

> if we could remember your muscle is my muscle
> your mother is my mother

and we all walk wet in rain
our tears would sprout justice
our actions would show kindness
our minds would expand consciousness
our borders would be blurred.[10]

[17] There are a number of axioms undergirding any liberation theology. One of them is that theology as critical reflection on praxis entails reflection on one's own struggle for liberation. The second follows: all theology is local. One of the main dangers of a Liberation Theology course focusing on global poverty and injustice is that North American students will retreat into disabling guilt. Understanding the complex ways in which we are both oppressed and oppressor is important; guilt is - mostly - useless. So, I have tried for years to use Paulo Freire as a tool for discussing what it means to be a student and in what ways students sense themselves to be disempowered. We also discuss the way that the university functions as a "wedge" institution separating the haves from the have nots, and examine the false consciousness that allows us to treat the university as *the* locus of social mobility in the face of disconfirming empirical data, and dissect the ways in which we, teachers and students alike, see ourselves as Weber's "free-floating intellectuals" removed from the social implications of the institution of higher education.[11]

[18] For my mostly first-generation students who work long hours to put themselves through college, experiences of alienation both at work and in the university come easily to mind. That these experiences are givens, brute facts not to be questioned but to be dealt with and get on with it, seems just as obvious to them. They use the tools of the course to uncover their own alienation but not the possibility of liberation. In trying to catalyze our own process of conscientization I have used a full repertoire of discussion techniques with limited success. Like many of the base communities that we study which, despite the "official" descriptions of their autonomous functioning, actually depend heavily on clerical initiative, most of these efforts have been too teacher-initiated and too teacher-dependent to take off.

[19] Because the class met only once a week and I wanted students to engage in a more continuous reflective process, I included as a course requirement in the most recent version of

[10] Kevin Coval, "If We Could Remember," in *In the Borderlands/En La Frontera* (quoted with permission).

[11] The goal of these discussions is to link inductively the student's own experience of alienation *within* the walls of the academy with the systemic alienation produced by higher education's (the "knowledge industry's") role in the larger society. The students' experience of alienation is nicely illustrated below (paragraph 21) by one student's comments. The more systemic form of alienation is harder to get at; fish, I tell my students, will be the last to discover the existence of water. Liberation Theology insists that the systemic analysis that it adopts must be applied to one's own institutional location. For clerical theologians like Gutierrez the home institution was the Church. Somehow we, lay liberation theologians, have adopted the principle but failed to realize that for most us the institution where we spend the bulk of our lives is the university. We live and breathe the ideology of social mobility through talent and work and of higher education as a prime facilitator of merit. The ideology is grounded in the experience of the post-World War II generation. Beginning with the passage of the GI Bill and moving through the experience of the 1960s higher education, indeed, opened its gates to a wider diversity of students. There is clear evidence, however that, beginning in the mid 1970s, things began to change significantly. The clearest indicator of who will attend college is now the level of household wealth, just as the level of educational attainment is the clearest predictor of eventual household wealth. Rather than fostering social mobility, higher education at the aggregate level functions to reinforce class boundaries. Few of us, however, are ready to grapple with evidence that does not fit with the prevailing ideology. For further discussion of higher education as increasingly an agent of inequality, see "The Widening Gap in Higher Education."

the course participation in a “HyperNews” discussion forum. HyperNews is one software that allows a threaded discussion (cf. the log of entries in figures 1 and 2). Early in the course I would pose topics for discussions based on issues which had arisen in class or in the readings but which we had not explored sufficiently. Later on, I continued to post essay questions and class assignments and I commented occasionally on students’ postings. But fairly quickly the students took over this forum.

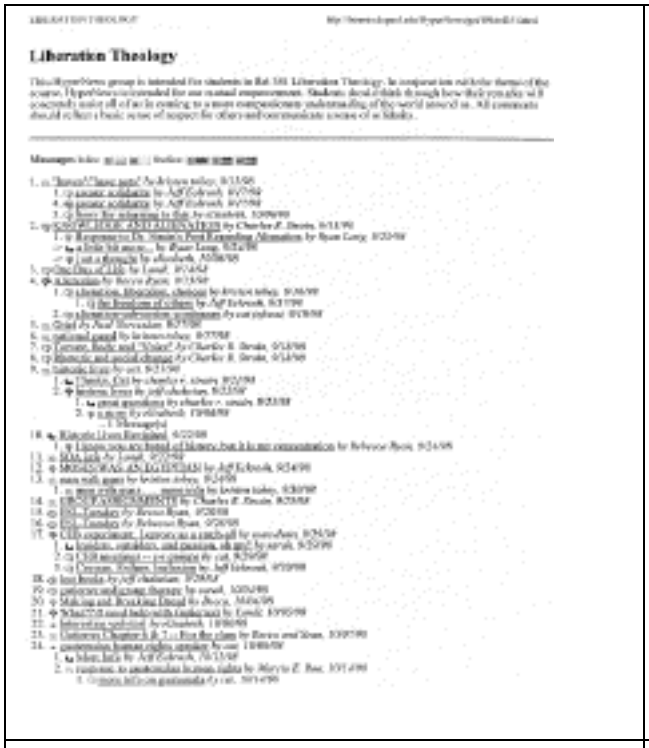


Figure 1



Figure 2

[20] Taking over the forum meant remaking it. Students posted mini-reviews of films such as “Men With Guns” that were relevant to the course which, in turn, prompted other students’ comments. Many commented about struggles they were having in meeting the challenges of their service placement. Announcements of trips to protest at places like the School of the Americas sprang up all over the place. Students with backgrounds in Latin American Studies filled in Religious Studies majors on the historical background surrounding the recent arrest of August Pinochet and current crises in places such as Guatemala. Religious Studies majors became thoughtfully attentive to the beliefs and non-beliefs of their fellow students. In one remarkable exchange a student who had all her life taken strong christological affirmations for granted asked the non-Christians in the class how *they* reacted to Gutierrez’s christology. The meaning and meaningfulness of those theological affirmations, apparently, depended for her as much on the response of non-believers as on her own.

[21] While the classroom discussions correspondingly became richer and more frank with students peacefully engaging one another’s underlying assumptions, HyperNews gave some students the opportunity to say what they otherwise would not have said in front of their peers or me. Distance freed them to be both more reflective and self-revealing. Best of all, in these exchanges they forgot about me or writing for me as the assumed reader. Students addressed one another by name, apologized if they had misunderstood or misrepresented another’s position, and

asked for help in clarifying difficult questions on a take-home essay - notably they asked this of one another and *not* me. They gave each other electronic high fives for their classroom presentations. Almost always, they ended by saying, "Thanks for listening." Given the kind of visual cues that we often pick up in class that students ignore one another's comments and focus only on the teacher's, the assumption that others would pay attention to a HyperNews posting was remarkable to me. There were many, many thoughtful and astute postings but two stand out because they comment on my whole struggle to make the practice of this class an experience of its content. The first entry expresses the student's need to link theory with the practice of everyday life.

> Sean, I was also pretty wierded out by the fact that we could not have a consciousness raising group. I will also definitely give props to Strain for trying to do that, but in the same breath that I say it was super gutsy, I think it kind of came out of the blue. Like we have never been able to have these really risky conversations about our lives before, so why would we have been able to this past Wednesday? How are we supposed to understand that our lives and our lives' experiences are important when academia totally degrades it. Anthro, soc, pol sci, all of the social science[s] can be really dehumanizing. Authors almost never place themselves in the texts and if they do, it's usually in a safe way. Teachers rarely talk about themselves in class. Students hardly ever talk about themselves in class. I have been told that talking about myself and my life was not important, and when that happens in a class, it is seen as . . . this purging thing or therapy thing. It's almost as if we do not truly believe theory and practice can inform each other. Like analysis cannot happen if I am talking about dating someone or something. Like I am the only one that has ever dated another person and so we can't be placed in a larger social context. Because this relationship has patterns that have to do with my life and with her life, with how women deal with relationships, with how lesbians deal with relationships, with how we communicate, with how we are seen by straight people, blah, blah, blah. (I know that is an example that not everyone can relate to, but that is a position from which I speak. Straight people speak from a straight location. I use dating as an example because it is such an easy one which is a huge basis of pop culture.) That is analysis in everyday life, I think.

[22] I realize that many teachers, including many of us in Religious Studies, have successfully created the kind of class that this student saw as missing in higher education. I feel sure that she, in particular, has been in such classes. So why would she make these comments with such passion? I see this posting as significant for two reasons: First, despite our best efforts the academy remains an alien and alienating presence in many of our students' lives. Second, this student's comments on dating indicate that the theory/practice dialectic that liberation theologians love to talk about abstractly must somehow become in her words "analysis in everyday life."

[23] The second entry recognizes the pain at the heart of any practice. It also reflects the labor of this particular student in moving from the recognition of alienation to the possibility of liberation.

> I saw "Men With Guns" this past weekend, also. What a great movie touching so purposefully vaguely on so many big, often unrecognized issues. One thing that struck me particularly was the doctor's realization that in trying to do good, contribute to or change his country, he actually hurt/killed people. He made a mistake. I think in the lives of many of us, the roads we are aiming to follow are so unclear, that sometimes in our best intentions we may be only contributing to evils we are intending to fight. I think we have to swallow, learn from our mistakes, and be willing to start over, even destroy the progress we think we were making. Maybe that is what Liberation Theologians are attempting to do within the Church. Realizing the harm they have done, and working to start over.

[24] A remarkable insight, I believe, that goes to the core of liberation theology and, I would argue, should go to the core of the practice of teaching liberation theology. Teaching liberation theology requires of us that we adopt what Zen Buddhist's call, “Beginner's Mind.” If we could remember that the academy creates its own iron walls just as clearly as those that separate the citizens of Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora. If only we could remember that, however radical the *content* of our courses, *as components of a system* they simultaneously reinforce the social functions of the institution of higher education. How do we begin to blur the borders that higher education systematically creates? The act of teaching is not disengaged from the site of teaching. For many of the reasons that my students have suggested and that I have discussed, the academy is rarely a site of liberation. Realizing the harm we have done, we need, repeatedly, to start over.

Bibliography

Argueta, Manlio

1983 *One Day of Life.* New York: Vintage.

Burdick, John

1993 *Looking for God in Brazil.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Eyler, Janet and Dwight E. Giles, Jr.

1999 *Where’s the Learning in Service Learning.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Gilligan, Carol

1983 *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press

Gutierrez, Gustavo

1988 *Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.

_____

1999 *In the Borderlands/En la Frontera*. Privately printed by DePaul University students who participated in the December 1998 trip to Nogales, Sonora, Mexico.

Kraft, Kenneth

1999 *The Wheel of Engaged Buddhism.* New York: Weatherhill.

Levine, Daniel

1992 *Popular Voices in Latin American Catholicism.* Princeton: Princeton University Press

MacIntyre, Alasdair C.

1984 *After Virtue*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press

Nhat Hanh, Thich

1987 *Being Peace*. Berkeley: Parallax.

Pena, Devon G.

1997 *The Terror of the Machine.* Austin: Center for Mexican American Studies.

Snyder, Gary

1990 *The Practice of the Wild.* San Francisco: North Point.

Thurman, Robert

1998 *Inner Revolution.* New York: Riverbend.

_____

1996 "The Widening Gap in Higher Education." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 42 (June 4): A10-A17.