

Education as Solidarity

Michelle J. Bellino

affiliation

James Loucky

affiliation

Abstract: Critical thinking and civic education are never more needed than during periods of deep social and political division, particularly when these divisions convulse societies comprised of multiple and mobile people. Two critical, yet largely overlooked dynamics provide considerable insight into the direction and impacts inherent in applied educational research: solidarity and transculturality. Marjorie Faulstich Orellana, in her Presidential Address to the Council on Anthropology and Education, articulates a personal and political entreaty for their joint transformative potential, drawing on activist scholarship arising in social justice struggles in and between Central America and the United States. In response, we explore the critical intersections of solidarity and transculturality and their bridging and “debordering” potential in pursuit of a changing world.

Solidarity, sanctuary, and horizontalism

The concept of solidarity evokes images of fervor, courage, and challenge, but has also come to have multiple meanings and manifestations historically as well as in contemporary life. It involves people in mobilizing ties of mutual understanding and community obligation to confront, and change, what is unacceptable. Forces of exploitation, capitalization, and dispossession are the main arenas for solidarity, and yet the determinants and dynamics also apply to effective and transformative education, hidden curricula, and implicit hierarchies

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enacted even in democratic classrooms. So grounding this encapsulation of anthropology and education in solidarity is both constructive and overdue. As the world, led (or misled) by the United States, faces resurgence of empire in myriad forms that are both bludgeoning and insidious, “solidarity forever” is a goal and promise that is far beyond platitude.

The horizontal quality of solidarity as collective and corrective action taking place between equals contrasts with the top-down nature of “helping,” which rarely challenges power relations and may humiliate those receiving it. Solidarity brings together people, ideas, and lived experiences in relations of mutuality and leadership at the local level, even when “local” is a concept in motion. Acknowledging equity and horizontalism is particularly crucial in the Americas, given the north-south power imbalances embedded in a legacy of empire and the violence that accompanied it for five centuries before exploding in the late 20th century. Hundreds of thousands fled north, including indigenous Maya who constitute more than half of those whose origins were in Guatemala. Amid times that were dangerous and difficult for Central Americans in and beyond their homelands, Marjorie and James met through solidarity work and Q’anjobal classes with refugees in the heart of Pico Union, while Michelle’s involvement came during post-war realities that remain fraught with recrimination and new forms of violence.

During the 1980s, when what we have since come to call neoliberalism was on the ascendancy, people routinely assigned to be “south” of “us” (i.e., the United States) were targeted for “protective” counterinsurgency, even as survivors fled for their lives into the country responsible for their uprooting. During this assertion of geopolitical “exceptionalism” and entrenchment that echoes what we see today, Central America became preoccupation as well as proving ground. And as the human face of hegemony and counterinsurgency became visible in

the communities of refugees fleeing north, people across the continent participated in what became known simply as “solidarity.” It included Central Americans and North Americans in spaces and actions that spanned cultural origins, national borders, and language.

An especially powerful manifestation of solidarity was that of sanctuary. Hundreds of congregations, cities, and even campuses responded to the misguided and harmful foreign and domestic policies of the Reagan administration by declaring sanctuary, which entailed commitment to providing safe haven. Sanctuary, along with the many other advocacy and coalitional activities of solidarity, centered on support for human rights and collective energizing through multiple strands of popular education and transcultural engagement.

Whether the neoliberal model of recent decades is today waning or simply repositioning itself, we cannot ignore how corporate and militarized power remains firmly entrenched. Whether and how solidarity is awakened, much less sustained, thus continues to be paramount for anthropological and educational praxis. Traditional rights paradigms continue to bind states to their citizens, though efforts to claim and uphold rights have expanded to the global community. Transnational civil society actors and the movements that forge solidarity within and across borders, have thus become essential brokers of human rights, democratic accountability, and both civic and human rights education more broadly. Meanwhile, schools are increasingly tasked with the work of shaping global citizens who cultivate a sense of moral outrage at injustice near and far, as well as an understanding of the injustice near and far, as well as an understanding of the interdependence and mutuality that fuels collective action.

Bridging elementary teaching with community organizing, and subsequently moving into higher education, Marjorie’s evolution reveals how critical praxis can powerfully shape research trajectories as well as identities. Working at the intersection of scholarship and activism requires

that we “change ourselves as we change the institutions in which we work... to create new identities, affinities, affiliations, and identifications” (Lipsitz, 2008, p. 100). In this address, Marjorie links her childhood, professional, and political experiences to the imperfect social worlds she has inhabited and to the better worlds she has worked to create.

The power nexus of transculturality and solidarity

Marjorie’s work suggests that we often expect transculturality to “flow” effortlessly and irrelevant of entrenched hierarchies, but shoulder rubbing is just the start. The movement inherent in *trans* concepts entails a merging of fluidity with keen recognition of power inequities. One tension worth naming is who stands to gain the most from solidarity mobilizations, when asymmetrical distributions of power translate into uneven experiences of risk and reward. Recognizing that risk is distributed unevenly sheds light on why those most directly impacted by unjust practices of states or corporations might not consistently see themselves as efficacious civic actors and might even come to question the nature of collective action as a vehicle for change (Bellino, 2015). Under these conditions, it seems vital to express solidarity with and without—standing with others and “still understand[ing] why not everyone chooses to stand along with us,” as Marjorie puts it.

Somewhat paradoxically, justice is often easier to do outside of unjust contexts than within them. This is an agonizing reality in settings where corrupt leaders exploit the legitimacy of the state to denounce, repress, and criminalize popular movements as threats, as remains the case in Guatemala and elsewhere in Central America today. Leveraging the power and privilege of citizenship status has given rise to transnational solidarity as expressions of “proxy citizenship” (Henderson, 2009), illuminating and resisting the ways that power is ascribed

inequitably onto different bodies. For those of us who occupy privileged spaces in solidarity struggles, this recognition is an essential dimension of transculturality.

Marjorie recalls the experience of solidarity as “standing with others across lines of difference that would normally divide us.” In this address, she asks whether we can teach others—and indeed whether we can teach ourselves—to stand in solidarity with others, “without dismissing people who feel differently—even diametrically opposed to us—as automatically or categorically wrong.” This perspective-taking work is fundamental to enacting the ideals of democratic pluralism within and outside of schools. And it becomes a global challenge as transnational crises and migration trouble traditional conceptions of belonging as confined to nation-states, borders often invisibly enforced through everyday interactions in schools (Abu El-Haj, 2015).

Educators and anthropologists of education have long questioned how diversity and affinity are constructed, conjuring the paradoxical work of collective identities that both unite and divide. These dual forces also pose a risk for social movements, in that “the very solidarity on which activist groups depend can make them narrow, insular, and isolated” (Lipsitz, 2008, p. 92). Transculturality, in part a precursor for solidarity as collective action, is thus also a necessary corrective when unity becomes divisive.

Debordering Solidarity

In coming together across borders of cultural identities, relative privilege and safety, and legal legitimacies, social movements past and present have forged, enacted, and displayed solidarity with one another through shared struggles and common purpose. Their merging is both physical and conceptual. Coming together creates an opening for transculturality—for the

meeting, mingling, merging, and reshaping of identities and meanings across asymmetrical conditions of power, though this movement is not inevitable. The *trans* in transculturality implies “a movement beyond borders, a transcendence or transformation of things that were being held apart, or artificially constructed as separate and distinct... it is about questioning the ontologies that hold things apart” (Orellana, 2016, p. 91). Solidarity *deborders* through transculturality when it transcends the sum of its parts—when coming together transcends a dialogue of refusal. Unhinging from the constraints of what is, transcultural solidarity imagines and demands remapping in order to create something new.

Overt as well as structural violence is embedded in the lived experiences of the peoples in and of Mesoamerica. Their efforts and victories in successfully contending with oppression and subterfuge offer essential narratives, as well as pedagogy. They include resisting attempts to co-opt them, and their solidarity, through appropriating language, rebranding conventional pathways of consumerism, and otherwise masking inequities and harm through globalized media and marketing tactics. Solidarity movements become “pedagogies of resistance” (Jaramillo & Carreon, 2014), with applications to democratic education writ large. These movements, involving both intergenerational remembering and envisioning, offer possibilities for linking democratic citizenship education learned in schools to lived experiences of citizenship, collective organizing, resistance, and resilience.

The mission of a participatory and liberating education takes us, as it has protagonists like Marjorie Orellana, both in and beyond schools, personally and professionally. It focuses not only on the loudest adversaries and latest lunacies, which in an age of alternative facts and obligatory amnesia may represent one of the biggest distractions of all. Systemic subjugation of civic society through undermining meanings of language, civility, and common sense, requires

inspired, sustained, and critical civic education. Solidarity both organized and spontaneous is vital, and it emerges as we continuously remember that there is no teaching without learning, and that intergenerational justice is a shared endeavor and benefit for all. Key to this endeavor is acknowledging that as the concept of globalism is contested, the realities of growing and generative transculturalities are more than just normative human experiences. Human diversity and mergings are sources of tremendous benefits in terms of adaptability at both social and individual levels.

Within and beyond this address, Marjorie's work queries the nature of boundaries between childhood and adulthood, work and play, teaching and learning, while revealing how liminalities can also construct passageways. As we enter an age of entrenched nationalism and xenophobia, crossing and transcending borders generates new questions: how do we stand in solidarity with those who are excluded and threatened, while also working to understand how exclusionary policies have drawn such widespread popular support? And how do we hold onto our sense of moral outrage as we work toward more nuanced understandings of the contexts and experiences that have given rise to unacceptable threats to our sense of self and community? How to stand in solidarity as some, more than others, face substantial risk and uncertainty, is a difficult but essential challenge, one that grows more urgent and fraught as we become increasingly aware of the constraints placed on "humane migration" by statist and corporatist interests (Ho and Loucky 2012).

Borders need not only divide; bordering can also be an edging together, whether in spatial, social, or disciplinary respects. The transperspectivity of solidarity promotes deeper mutuality, in part as it confirms the Frierean notion that there is no teaching without learning. Contemporary justice efforts, like the experiences of and with Central Americans past and

present, have lessons for social movements as well as migratory ones, including for freedom of movement across all kinds of borders, and for the staggering crisis of refuge today. Building cultural memories, while moving through life trajectories, reaffirm anthropology as educational, and education as anthropological.

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