

Two Cross-Disciplinary Projects to Promote Authentic Language Use and Community Development Abroad and at Home:

Case studies of targeted language development through faculty-student research

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1. Faculty-Student Research in Nicaragua

Background: Two students from the Political Science department worked with Nicaraguan microfinance organizations researching strategies to eradicate poverty. In Nicaragua, micro-finance plays a very unique, open, and political role in both the lives of individuals and government affairs. This project analyzed micro-finance in Nicaragua as well as its relation, past and present, to the politics of the country. Interviews were conducted in Spanish with Nicaraguan loan recipients (mainly female small business owners—see picture) and individuals involved in different aspects of micro-finance in order to obtain personal insight.

Participants: Foreign Languages Department, Political Science Department, Economics Department, Latin American Studies, Center for International Programs

Funding: \$5900 from the CIE for international travel for two students and one faculty

Logistics: Fall, Winterim, and Spring semesters 2010-2011—One-semester independent study course (Foreign Languages) to review the literature prior to in-country research, three weeks research in Teustepe Nicaragua, one-semester post-research independent study to analyze and prepare the findings.

programs in Nicaragua

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EAI CLAIRE—Innovative lending programs in Nicaragua are helping women there work together more efficiently and to better manage their finances, according to a faculty-student research team from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire that is studying the political effects of microfinance in rural Nicaragua.

"Due to Nicaragua's volatile political nature and the upcoming presidential elections, it was difficult to collect information on formal political membership and participation," said Kelsey Roets, a senior political science and Latin American studies major from Waterloo who spent three weeks in Nicaragua in January. "However, we observed that participation in group lending teaches these women skills such as group governance and finance. These skills support their community organization and expand the women's sphere of influence by developing relationships and businesses."

Newspaper article written about experience.



Sra. Teodora, loan-recipient, selling her baked goods in Teustepe, Nicaragua.



A UW-Eau Claire faculty-student research team spent three weeks in Nicaragua in January studying innovative lending programs. The students spent time with women who are using the lending program to support their businesses. The research team is pictured above with two of the local women with whom they spent significant time. The UW-Eau Claire team (from left) include Spanish instructor Amy Young and students Ian Allen and Kelsey Roets. (Submitted photos)

1. Honors Domestic Immersion Experience in Urban Milwaukee

Background: During this pilot project, six Honor's students enhanced their intercultural communication skills through a five-day immersion experience in South Milwaukee. Each student completed 15 hours of service learning while assisting in the development of community-based learning opportunities, meaningful collaboration between the institution and communities of color in Wisconsin, and innovative development strategies to shape the future of Wisconsin's culture and economy. One of the organizations, Milwaukee Inner-City Congregations Allied for Hope (MICA), is a multi-racial, interfaith organization committed to addressing justice issues that have an impact on the community. The two students placed with MICA worked in Spanish doing one-on-one interviews with Latin American immigrants to support MICA's current goals.

Participants: Foreign Languages Department, English Department, Honor's Program

Funding: \$5933 from the Domestic Intercultural Immersion Project Development Differential Tuition grant for six students and two faculty members

Logistics: Spring semester, 2011—One semester literature review in Honor's classes (English), one week action-research in Milwaukee, WI, post-experience journal reflections and discussions



Sister Barbara with students preparing to begin the one-on-one interviews.



Urban Milwaukee.

2. Research Questions and Methods

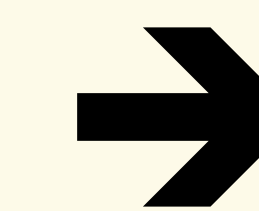
Question: What is the relationship between demographics, microloans, voting, and political activism? In 2006 Muhammad Yunus was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his work developing and designing microcredit systems in Bangladesh. Since this time the movement has expanded and microfinance organizations are presently working worldwide to eradicate poverty through feasible economic alternatives. Within the context of this movement an emphasis has been placed on individual economic empowerment while individual political ramifications tend to be overlooked and underemphasized.

Methods: Working in Tepehuajes, Nicaragua, alongside an established microfinance organization, Prestanic, interviews were conducted of their past and present recipients of microloans (in their native language) regarding experiences receiving a loan, political opinions, and participation in recent elections. The survey data was compiled and consolidated into a collection of recorded interviews and personal narratives. From all of the data gathered a bilingual documentary film was produced for educational presentations.

2. Research Questions and Methods

Question: How can participation in social justice activities in an urban environment influence the actions and thinking of undergraduate students in a small, mid-western college? Through this experience, students would ideally be better prepared for civil discussions and have a greater capacity to discuss and debate issues related to cultural pluralism, national identity, and the future of American democracy. Students would be better able to grapple with contested social questions and to enhance their appreciation of expressive texts from diverse cultural perspectives and relationships with members of diverse communities.

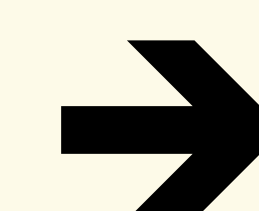
Methods: Students read and worked in class to develop cross-cultural communication skills and knowledge of urban Milwaukee. Skills included anticipation of comfort zones, mindful communication, control of assumptions, developed empathy, and cultural competency through working across differences. Knowledge included economic cycles, south-north migration, segregationist policies that reinforced patterns of low educational/economic attainment, and efforts to respond to achievement gaps through educational reform and immigrant services. These skills were then reinforced through five days of community immersion and reflective journaling.



Interviews were conducted in women's homes or community centers.



Cattle ranching is the base of the economy in this region. Laundry is washed in the river by women.



MICA's community organizing in Milwaukee.



Southside Milwaukee mural promoting cultural integration and peace.

3. Results and Discussion

Results:

- Based on the interviews, the loans appear to extend women's spheres of influence and community participation through organizations and business. ("En términos generales, concluimos que los grupos ayudan a las mujeres extender sus áreas de influencia por animando participación en la comunidad con la formación de organizaciones y empresas.")
- The groups teach important skills such as group dynamics and the democratic process. ("Los grupos enseñan capacidades importantes, como organización de grupos y el proceso democrático.")
- Financial knowledge gained from the micro-loan process increase confidence in and knowledge of financial institutions. ("Adicionalmente, hemos concluido que los micro-prestamos junto con educación de negocios no solo aumenta confianza y conocimiento de instituciones financieras...")

Discussion:

Research implied that micro-loans facilitate community organizing which, by its very nature is political. ("Nuestras conclusiones demuestran que los préstamos solidarios fomentan organización dentro de la comunidad, esto en sí mismo es político.")

3. Results and Discussion

Results:

- Students from both rural and urban backgrounds benefit from detailed conversations about what they expect and their preparation to work in an urban community.
- Students anticipated that living in a city would be stressful and difficult, however they found it to offer many opportunities and positive cultural experiences ("the city has a lot to offer – museums, restaurants, music, universities...I could see myself living in Milwaukee"; "I would love to live here again because of the cultural diversity")
- Students reported valuing most the "one-to-one" communication opportunities during their interviews with recent immigrants to the South Milwaukee area. ("Enjoyable moments include having a room full of people who are bilingual and using both languages!!")

Discussion:

This experience proved to hold promise as a method for bridging divisions between universities and broader communities, including diverse language communities; to invite dialogue on the challenges and benefits of building programs that engage students and faculty in critical service work in urban settings; and to suggest ways of securing support from university administrations and the wider community for programs that address issues of equity, diversity, and inclusiveness in innovative ways.