

Building Experiential Communities: A Holistic Approach in Education



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This article is about my own personal experience as an educator. When I finished high school, I was hired as a fifth grade teacher in an elementary school located in one of the most neglected neighborhoods in the capital city of Colombia. On the first day of classes I met 35 students, between 10-16 years of age who came to the school hungry and without even a pen or pencil, unprotected from the cold weather of Bogotá and with little or no enthusiasm to learn. The first priority for these kids was to survive the day and particularly to put something warm in their stomachs. From the first day of classes it was very clear to me that the first thing I needed to provide these kids was food. Then, I could feed them with my knowledge and dreams. So, I decided to start our day with bread and milk. A week later our breakfast menu was expanded as the kids brought “something else” to share with the class. Through this simple act we were able **to develop an experiential community reality** that allowed us to feel as one.

The building of this community gave us an implicit understanding of acceptance, sharedness, inclusiveness and collaboration **to serve a common**

goal or ideal. This goal or ideal was not explained or obvious, not even for me as the instructor of the class. But it was a tangible reality in our physical environment and in our minds. It was great to be together. If someone could not come to school for any reason, he/she was missed and he or she missed us at the same time. Everybody was looking forward to being at the school every day.

My first monthly payment was invested in buying pieces of chalk of different colors and for every child, a pen, color pencils, an eraser and a poster board. With these tools at hand I felt ready to conquer the minds and the hearts of my students. As a teacher in this school I taught all subjects: history, mathematics, geography, biology, Spanish reading and composition. I decided to make the school experience for these children a unique and unforgettable one. The poster boards were used to draw the Colombian map and its political divisions. I then asked the children to cut off all the political states on the 23 departments (states), so the map was transformed into a big puzzle. Every morning when we arrived at the classroom, students used the first ten minutes in competing among themselves as to how fast they could put together all these pieces of the Colombian map. In this simple way they were learning the name of the states and their location within the territory. **Learning has to be fun and engaging.** As we were covering Colombian geography, the students were adding the mountains, snow peaks, valleys, rivers and everything of interest to the puzzle, exactly where they belonged. So as the academic year advanced, the puzzles were transformed into beautiful holograms. In addition, I was teaching math through history or history through math. I explained to the students the fights between Indians and conquistadors with

as much realism as I was able to show. In other words, I transformed myself into a story teller. I always finished the story in suspense mode, so when the students started begging me to continue the story, my answer was always the same: tomorrow at the same time, in the same room. I connected geography to history by explaining to my students all the difficulties the Spaniards faced during the time of the conquest: fighting in completely unknown territories against the indigenous people who didn't have the same fighting tools but who knew very well the caves, mountains, and hills of their land and therefore, were able to find refuge in the high altitudes and snow peaks of the many mountains, or by crossing rivers and valleys. Explaining math by using proportions, percentages and the number of men in the army of the conquistadors fighting against a group of Indians of half their number.

At the end of the class we had a lot of information to integrate. The **integration of ideas and concepts** became eloquent when the students needed to identify and illustrate in words, diagrams, or drawings what happened in each state as they had learned in their history class, explaining proportions, ratios, percentages of Spaniards, peasants or indigenous people dying or surviving on each side of the rival sides, on the maps they had as puzzles. Just in picking one state, the students were able to identify the **connections among ideas and fields of knowledge from different disciplines**. As an educator I learned the importance of **creating interdisciplinary assignments connecting rich content with development of mastering essential skills and capabilities**.

Later on, the kids came up with another beautiful idea: to draw on the classroom floor a permanent outline of the Colombian map at a higher scale and with wood dust in different colors to represent the cordilleras, rivers, valleys and of course, the scenes of the battlefields. Groups of 4-5 children worked during the class recess, dressing the map on the floor with the wood dust that we had to remove and put back every day, preparing the scenario for the interdisciplinary studies as we called the teaching of math and geography through history. Every day, there was a different team, one more creative than

the other. I used this creativity for grades as practical exams. **Team effort was highly appreciated and quite effective.**

This type of assignment brought great amounts of energy and enthusiasm, especially because it was suggested by the same students and was fun to work on in groups. Bonds among students became very strong, developing **peer-mentoring** that in some cases lasted after the school year. As the months passed by, the enthusiasm for attending school started growing and becoming quite evident to the school director, parents and the teachers, including myself. Everybody was quite impressed by the teaching and learning results, by the self-discipline the students developed by supporting each other and forming an impressive and inspirational learning community. Parents talked to the community about how eager and disciplined their children had become toward their school and their own learning. Our classroom became a class model for faculty development workshops with the participation of students, parents and colleagues, not only within our school but from other schools in the city. Many years after this experience, my first students kept communicating with me, sharing stories of success and major events in their lives.

Years later, I became a full-time faculty member at Hostos Community College where I became the co-founder of the Center for Teaching and Learning and the Honors Program. Working with dedicated colleagues such as Robert Cohen, Kim Sanabria, Carlos Sanabria, John Gillen, Humberto Cañate, Zvi Ostrin, and the Serrano Scholars, we established the quite transformational experience of the Honors Institute, where we got together for a month from 8:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. as a group of individuals trying to answer *What Does It Mean to Be Human?* This was a journey of transformation for all of us who were part of this sacred journey in higher education. The Hostos Honors Institute was offered on a completely voluntary basis during its first year, as our Office of Academic Affairs was concerned that funding it might prove expensive; for the remaining years of the Institute, it did receive funding. This Hostos Honors Institute made history at our college, transforming the lives of several

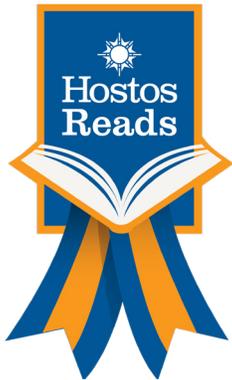
of our students as they discovered their personal values and talents, enhanced their own self-esteem, and created faculty-student and student-student

bonds lasting years beyond their Hostos experience and helping them to succeed at Columbia University as well as in other aspects of life.

— About the Author —

Dr. Bernal is a full Professor at the Natural Sciences Department at Hostos Community College of the City University of New York where she has worked as the Chair of the Department and Associate Dean of the Office of Academic Affairs. She worked on the creation of several initiatives at the college including the Honors Program for Liberal Arts students, the Summer Honors Institute, and the Center for Teaching and Learning. For 12 years she was the Chair of the College-Wide Curriculum Committee. Prof. Bernal-Carlo received the International Exemplary Leadership award from the Chair Academy as well as the Exemplary Initiatives award for Curriculum Innovation from the Instructional Leadership Academy.

Prof. Bernal-Carlo is a Colombian of indigenous descent. She works with the tribes of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (SNSM): Wiwa, Kogui and Arhuaco, on a variety of sustainable projects.



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