

Bringing Latin America to the Classroom

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Most students and teachers have not had the opportunity to travel to Latin America and the Caribbean. They base their ideas about the region¹ on mass media and the local Latin American restaurant. Stereotyped images often result. Even textbooks that include Latin America may exacerbate misconceptions (Anderson and Beck 1983; Fleming 1982; O'Connor and Nystrom 1985). How can teachers offer their students a realistic view? One way is to invite a guest speaker to the classroom who grew up in a Latin American country or who has extensive travel, business, or other experience in the region. Although students enjoy such firsthand accounts, their contact with this speaker may limit their impressions to that person's point of view. Unless accompanied by other perspectives, the student may conclude, for example, that all Latin Americans live like Señora Pereira, the middle class, university professor from Rio de Janeiro who speaks flawless English in addition to her native Portuguese. How can teachers overcome this limitation?

The traveling suitcases program developed at the University of Florida's Center for Latin American Studies² as part of its outreach services to schools can help. The suitcases contain collections of stamps, schoolbooks, comics, toys, currency, maps, flags, and other items that students, university professors, and K-12 teachers have donated from their travels to Latin America. Suitcases are available for Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela, as well as the subregions of the Caribbean and Central America. Each suitcase comes with a teacher's guide, an annotated inventory, country or region information, guidelines for teaching about Latin America, copies of desk-size maps, sample lesson plans, resource lists, and an evaluation form.³

Problems in Collecting Artifacts for Suitcases

Creating a suitcase might appear to be a simple task. After all, what could be easier than to ask for donations, pack

them up, and send them out? In a university with thousands of students and faculty, many of whom travel abroad or are themselves from Latin American and Caribbean countries, can we expect people to respond to requests for cultural artifacts with sensitivity? Not always, it turns out, for several reasons. First, university professors are oriented to adult, highly literate students. Their most common teaching methods—lecture and discussion—do not allow for using objects as teaching tools, setting up interest centers, or creating lessons based on assemblages of artifacts.

Second, people knowledgeable about another country may have forgotten how powerful first impressions can be. First-time visitors notice all sorts of trivial and profound things that more seasoned travelers or residents no longer see, at least consciously. Some of these everyday objects would make good artifacts for the suitcases, but the seasoned travelers do not collect them because they now consider them unimportant.

In contrast, a third problem is that too much tourist literature and artifacts are donated. It is reasonable to collect a certain amount of these types of items, because they are readily available to the traveler and because they do, in fact, have several merits; for example, tourist-oriented restaurant menus may be bilingual, presenting students with a lesson in language and in foods eaten in a particular country (among those who can afford to dine out—another issue). Another merit is the wealth of information on a country—again, sometimes in a bilingual format—offered by such items as tourism brochures and travel guides. Finally, the handicrafts of a country are offered for sale to tourists; indeed, many craft traditions would have died out if not for their appeal to tourists. What is wrong with including these items in the suitcases? A lot, in fact, but in order to explain why, we need to review two issues pertinent to the development and use of traveling suitcases: (1) material culture, and (2) teaching about Latin America (or any world area—many of the guidelines can be applied elsewhere).

The Concept of Material Culture

Material culture is a core concept in the discipline of anthropology. The *Dictionary of Anthropology* (Seymour-Smith 1986, 183) states that material culture

includes the sum or inventory of the TECHNOLOGY and material artifacts of a human group, including those elements related to subsistence activities as well as those which are produced for ornamental, artistic or ritual purposes.

Because they study human groups that lived in the past, archaeologists must rely on material culture to reconstruct now vanished ways of life, making inferences about many aspects of culture from artifacts and their precise location when found. Sociocultural anthropologists, by contrast, study contemporary human groups; they use material culture as an additional source of data, supplementing participant observation and informant interviewing.

Teachers face a problem of limited data availability similar in some respects to that faced by archaeologists. Although archaeologists face a time barrier in investigating past human societies, teachers face a spatial barrier in teaching about geographically distant peoples. As stated above, they have limited access to information on Latin America (for example, newspapers tend to cover only political upheavals and natural disasters), and sometimes they can find only biased information, ideal for helping to develop stereotypes. Traveling suitcases are, quite literally, a way to bring Latin America to the classroom.

Using Traveling Suitcases in Social Studies Courses

The study of Latin America enters the social studies curriculum in several courses at the middle/junior and senior high school levels—world geography, world history, world cultures, and international relations. Teachers vary their approach to studying the region (or a particular country within the region) according to the conceptual framework chosen. This is commonly a disciplinary framework (e.g., anthropology, geography, history, or political science), but may also be interdisciplinary. Nonetheless, as Woyach and Remy (1988, 484-88) note, world studies courses share both common themes and common problems. Problems stem from diverse but interrelated causes such as inadequate teacher preparation in disci-



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plines contributing to world studies, encyclopedic textbooks, and overreliance on the lecture as an instructional strategy. These problems are compounded by a general lack of interest in and education about Latin America.

No matter which academic framework teachers use, they will use the traveling suitcases in a particular context (e.g., in conjunction with background materials presenting the history, geography, culture, and politics of the country or region under study).

In recent years, several thoughtful, concise statements have appeared on teaching about Latin America, published by scholarly associations and university international studies centers. The most succinct is the motto, "Don't freeze it; don't type it; don't isolate it" (Heath 1977, 78). Effective teachers present Latin America as dynamic, not static, by showing how changes occur over time.

They avoid stereotypes by showing variations in individual and group adaptations to specific environments (a fundamental element of the concept of culture used in anthropology). They present the context in which a particular custom occurs as well as a link to the United States. Implicit in Heath's guidelines is the importance of reducing the strangeness of other world areas to the student by relating what the student is studying to comparable situations close to home.

In other words, using what I call the near-far-return approach to teaching about Latin America can help overcome two common problems: (1) too much emphasis on the exotic and (2) irrelevance to the students' interests. Students may experience many social studies topics and concepts according to the near-far-return approach. For example, students can investigate recreational sports in their community and discuss them in

terms of who the players are, when and where they play, who the sponsors are, who makes up the audience, what changes have occurred over time, and what the sport means to participants. Then, students can study a community in a Latin American country by asking the same questions.

Students may be surprised to learn that a familiar sport, such as swimming, is also popular in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, but is sponsored and practiced differently, with different cultural meanings for participants (Kottak 1985). Or that playing soccer or baseball in Latin America and the Caribbean varies according to historical ties to either Great Britain or the United States (Wagner 1985). The unit can conclude by reexamining the students' home community in light of the similarities and differences found elsewhere, and discussing what accounts for similarities and differences (e.g., parallels in historical development, geography, or migration). It may surprise students to learn that football is mainly a U.S. sport but that soccer is played around the world, or that sports may have religious significance, as it did to the Mayans and Toltecs of the Yucatan peninsula in Chichén Itzá, Mexico.

Studying the exotic, particularly using artifacts to do so, is a vexing problem in international and cross-cultural education. A typical classroom display of another country emphasizes the colorful and the strange, the handmade rather than the industrial product, the festival rather than everyday life, rural natives rather than the urban, middle-class residents. Too much emphasis on differences fosters an "us-versus-them" mentality that supports stereotype formation and makes empathy difficult. On the other hand, differences can excite interest in the topic, and no good teacher is going to ignore a motivator. The solution is not to be *limited* by teaching only similarities. Besides being boring and dishonest, students are likely to see through the deception; after all, they are consumers of the products of the mass media and they expect the Mexican restaurant to serve up the strange. The solution is to give equal time to both similarities and differences, a principle that multicultural education emphasizes (Garcia and Garcia 1980, 232-36).

Another excellent set of guidelines for teaching about Latin America presents twelve dos and don'ts (Stanford Program 1983). Each of the five don'ts

and seven dos are explained, with examples. Particularly relevant to this discussion is the guideline, "Don't present only one or two limited perspectives." The importance of including ways of life of Latin Americans from several socioeconomic sectors and the need to include various Latin American governments' views on foreign policy issues are only two of the suggested applications.

Criteria for Artifact Collections on Latin America

Taken together, we can apply the anthropological concept of material culture and the multidisciplinary guidelines for teaching about Latin America to the pitfalls of using assemblages of artifacts such as the traveling suitcases—or a teacher's classroom display on another country—to produce the following four criteria.

Balance

The first criterion, balance, is the most important and the most difficult to achieve because diversity is the most important lesson to be learned about Latin America, yet it is difficult to represent in an artifact collection. Not only is Latin America nationally diverse, each country encompasses considerable internal diversity. Materials should reflect the country's population and its diversity through its rural-urban distribution, race, ethnicity, gender, social class, and regional variations.

To offer just one example based on physical geography, Peru has three distinct regions: the arid Pacific coastal zone; high, cold, dry mountains and valleys in the central portion of the country; and a humid tropical rain forest in the east. Even within one region—the Andes mountains—climate and agriculture vary according to altitude and prevailing winds. People's lives vary greatly in the three geographic regions but also according to factors such as social class, ethnic identity, and urban or rural residence, many of which also have a geographical expression. The suitcase on another Andean country, Bolivia, illustrates cultural and physical diversity through a collection of miniature hats. In Bolivia, hats and other clothing styles vary from community to community. Hats may be studied in terms of function (keeping the sun's heat off the head or preventing heat loss from the body) or meaning (ethnic or regional identity). Bolivian hats may be compared to the

variety, use, and symbolism of hats in the United States.

Language

Furthermore, students and teachers unfamiliar with the region may be surprised to learn that all Latin Americans do *not* speak Spanish. Latin America's largest nation both in area and population, Brazil, is Portuguese speaking (with many Native American languages spoken as well). The Caribbean region is even more diverse linguistically, with English, French, Dutch, and papiamentu among the languages and dialects spoken in addition to Spanish. With these considerations in mind, the language criterion encompasses two principal goals: first, presenting the linguistic diversity of Latin America, and second, presenting enough materials in English for information purposes and to help monolingual English speakers to be comfortable with the materials.

Source of Materials

The third criterion, source of materials, returns us to the problem of including tourist literature and souvenirs and places it in the context of the importance of multiple perspectives. Because Latin America is so diverse, balancing various points of view is critical and we must apply them to both production and consumption of the artifacts. Items produced for the tourist industry by the government (country information published by state tourism agencies, for example), private businesses (the ubiquitous T-shirt), or by artisans (handicrafts) are included if they teach something about the country. They must, however, be balanced by items produced for internal consumption that teach about the interests of ordinary people from all walks of life. Toys, comic strips or books, newspapers, school texts, and product samples are examples of the latter.

Another concern about source of materials emphasizes the economic and cultural interdependence of Latin America and the United States. Several suitcases include collections of comic books, which are popular in many Latin American countries and which also appeal to students in the United States. Some of the comic books are translations from U.S. sources, such as *Hombre Arana* and *Homem Aranha* (Spanish and Portuguese translations of *Spider Man*). We include them in the suitcases to illustrate the popularity of U.S. mass culture among segments of

the Latin American population. Some Latin Americans (intellectuals, in particular) believe U.S. mass culture displaces Latin American cultural expressions and weakens the national identity of young people. Although this is an issue, the appeal of U.S. popular culture in Latin America is an important aspect of cultural life, and therefore it is included in the suitcases but is balanced by other comic books of Latin American authorship and publication.

Suitability

This fourth criterion emphasizes the durability, appropriateness, and teaching potential of the item. We do not include fragile or expensive items. We lend suitcases to elementary, middle, and secondary schools, so the best artifacts are those with meaning for a broad age range. Currency is an example of an item that teachers can use with students from kindergarten through 12th grade. Younger students can convert *pesos* or *inti* to U.S. dollars. The faces and landmarks on coins or bills can be a point of departure for library research on Latin American history. Older students can study inflation, devaluation, and the Latin American debt crisis.

Summary

Traveling suitcases can serve as one more vehicle for bringing Latin America to the classroom, supplementing textbooks, filmstrips, visiting speakers, and other sources (cf. Casteel and Guthrie 1980; Contreras 1987; Curcio-Nagy 1990; Gibbs 1986; Kilpatrick 1985; Knowlton 1984; Lombardi 1983; Stanford Program 1987).⁴ Their strength lies in offering a hands-on experience for students and a ready-made interest center for teachers to use in ways appropriate to their curriculum objectives. Their weakness is the difficulty in achieving balance of coverage and interest when relying on donated materials. Although assemblages of artifacts focused on history are not new to teachers (Chin 1986; Menser 1974), traveling suitcases are multidisciplinary and adaptable to many parts of the curriculum. They also shift the focus of most artifact kits on the United States to its neighbors.⁵ Traveling suitcases remind us of how much there is to learn about *all* of the Americas.

Notes

¹I prefer the broader area studies definition of Latin America—Mexico, the Caribbean, Central America, and South America (Goodwin 1990)—to

the historical, cultural definition of Latin America as "the eighteen Spanish-speaking republics of the Western Hemisphere, together with Portuguese-speaking Brazil and French-speaking Haiti" (Collier, Blakemore, and Skidmore 1985, 9).

²The Center for Latin American Studies outreach program at the University of Florida is supported in part by a grant from the United States Department of Education.

³The materials and guide are packed in a small trunk and are lent to teachers through the postal service. Teachers are asked to pay the cost of return postage and two hundred dollars of insurance.

⁴For a summary of Latin American curriculum and staff development programs at national resource centers funded by the United States Department of Education, see *INFORME*, the outreach newsletter of the Consortium of Latin American Studies Programs, published by the Roger Thayer Stone Center for Latin American Studies, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA 70118.

⁵Another approach similar to artifact collections is the "Latin America Box" developed for art education in Wisconsin elementary schools (see Rochelle M. Robkin, "The Latin America Box: Environmental Aesthetics in the Classroom," in *Latin American Art and Music: A Handbook for Teaching*, edited by Judith Page Horton [Austin: Institute of Latin American Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1989]).

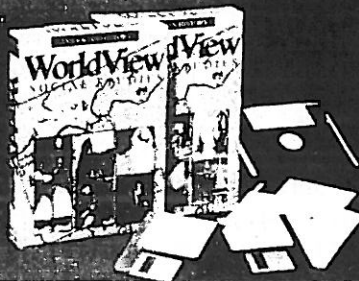
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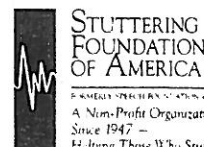


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